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The culture of local food : a life history study of farmers' market customers in a Midwest city

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**The culture of local food:
A life history study of farmers' market customers
in a Midwest city**

by

Britta Ann-Christin Solan

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Sociology

Program of Study Committee:
Clare Hinrichs, Major Professor
Lorna Michael Butler
Nancy Grudens-Schuck
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2002

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Britta Ann-Christin Solan

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

IN DEDICATION TO MY FAMILY

Our children Katherine, Lisa, Erik and Jeremy
(Who loaned their names to protect the anonymity of the interviewees)

and

My husband Peter who became my very own gourmet chef
while I immersed myself in the culture of local food

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ABSTRACT

Interest in local food systems has increased greatly in the last 20 years. This study sought to understand what motivates customers to purchase local foods, which may be more costly and less convenient to acquire than supermarket fare. I used the life history method to analyze the formation, complexity and interrelationships of motivations behind purchasing local food. This method permitted particular attention to changes in motivations over time. The sample included twelve food customers identified by key informant vendors from one urban farmers' market in Iowa. Using a semi-structured question guide and a drawing exercise, I gathered customers' oral and pictorial accounts of their food histories in face -to -face interviews conducted in the spring of 2001. Local food customers' motivations were a complex weave of moral, philosophical and social dimensions developed over a long period of time through experiences and social interactions. Childhood experiences were often reflected in adult meanings customers attached to local food. Socially engaged European travel, fine dining and educational experiences were additional themes connected to local food by the customers. This study suggests that customer motivations for selecting local foods and maintaining their commitment can be viewed as contributing to a culture of local food. Through social interactions centered on local food, customers and vendors find and create shared patterns of meaning that further constitute a culture of local food.

PRELUDE

As the sun slowly rises over the tree lined downtown streets in Des Moines, Iowa, hours of diligent and hard work are revealed. The canopies are up. The tables are stacked with colorful produce and flowers, sweet-smelling baked goods, ethnic and exotic foods, invigorating art, skillfully made clothing and imaginative, and not so imaginative, crafted items.

Several hours earlier, in the still sunless morning, dedicated farmers, growers, artists, and re-seller vendors packed their cars, vans, buses and trucks and headed to the market. The results of many days and weeks of labor will hopefully bring rewards this morning. It's market day in downtown.

The city prepared as well. The streets were swept; garbage was cleared out; and illegally parked cars were towed away. The customers got themselves out of bed, brushed their teeth, pulled a comb through their hair and headed for the market. The city and the country are readied for their impending Saturday morning date.

An expectancy mingles in the air with the aromas of the gently cooking falafel, egg rolls, stir-fry, vegetarian wraps, lamb skewers, and baked pastry. It's a little sleepy at first until everyone has had his or her first freshly brewed coffee and warm cinnamon roll. Laughter comes from one stall and the police officers are being treated to a bag of freshly popped kettle corn at another. The dance can begin.

Growers and customers have met or desired to meet like this, for social interaction, making a living and acquiring food, since the dawn of civilization. A Des Moines newspaper article from the early 1900s argued that the city should allow space for direct interaction between growers and eaters by "providing staple food at farm prices", following the same premises of the city planning and supporting "hospital, parks, education, good water, and paved streets" (Staff reporter 1922:8). Early on,

citizens saw the value of access to local food but had trouble convincing city planners, who were more attuned to economic growth. The citizens in other cities today also find city planners reluctant to look at food systems planning as a legitimate source of concern, unless it brings positive economic activity to the city through, for example, a City Market (Kameshwari and Kaufman 2000). Meanwhile, since the 1970s, all across America, direct grower-customer interaction has experienced a resurgence reminiscent of the start of the 20th century when the market in Des Moines was especially vibrant and customers were as passionate about shopping at the market as local food shoppers are today.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A Food Culture in the Making

Growing public interest in local food is reflected in the recent plethora of articles in journals and the daily press. In the *New York Times* between August 2000 and August 2001, 26 articles addressed locally grown food. The articles spoke to changes in local farmers' choices, chefs' menus and the food system. Farmers have been changing what they grow and how they market it in order to keep their farms, according to one article:

[It's] a dirty job, but it seems more people want to do it; planting the seed for a resurgence of the small farm.... The Northeast is undergoing agricultural rebirth after [a] period in which old-time farmers were retiring; younger farmers [are] re-growing more specialized and expensive items, helping to keep agriculture alive in region (Flaherty 2000:C1).

As a result of these changes and the growth in farmers' markets, the food system is also changing. As noted in *The Des Moines Register*,

The most exciting trend is the movement to promote locally grown products... Five years ago you would have been hard pressed to find "Iowa Grown" food on a menu or in a store. But that is changing. The proliferation of farmers' markets, the producers diversifying what they raise and how they sell it are indicators of the change (Hamilton 2001:9A).

Restaurant food, too, is changing as chefs show increased interest in featuring and celebrating locally grown food. Alice Waters is often seen as introducing "locally grown food" into the repertoires of gourmet chefs across America:

Over the past 30 years, Alice Waters, creator and proprietor of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California has revolutionized the way Americans think about food. In an attempt to recreate the memorable dining experiences she had as a college student in France, the New Jersey-born Waters hit upon a simple formula: eat organically grown produce that's in season, and meats and fish that haven't been shot full of hormones and preservatives. Her message turned out to be the chef's equivalent of architect Mies van der

Rohe's "less is more." Indeed, Waters, 57, is credited with bringing to the culinary mainstream her reverence for fresh, local ingredients in dishes with a Mediterranean sensibility (Weingarten 2001: 44).

Alice Waters' experiences as a college student and her values system are not unique. Customers of local food in Iowa share her experiences and have come to some of the same conclusions concerning food-values. Today's customers are aware that they can "vote" with their food dollars and effect change.

Among customers and growers in the U.S. there is also a resurgence of interest in the land that is almost mystical, reminiscent of Scarlett O'Hara's experience at the end of the movie *Gone With the Wind* based on Margaret Mitchell's book:

Ghost-like voices ... from {Scarlett's} past remind her of the source of her strength in the soil of Tara...: "Land's the only thing that matters, it's the only thing that lasts." ... "It's from this you get your strength, the red earth of Tara." Scarlett ... can always return to the land - to Tara, to soak up its strength (Dirk 1996-2002).

At a time of crisis and alienation, Scarlett turns to the land "to soak up its strength." Similarly, in the United States today, the relationship to the land through "local food" brings a sense of continuity and security at a time of increasing disconnection from the soil in favor of things not alive, like technology and fast paced life styles.

Locally grown food is sold at road-side stands, farms, health-food stores, and grocery stores. It is also featured at upscale restaurants, and marketed through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). However, it is the farmers' markets that have been the topic of much of the research. Researchers have looked into the nature of these markets and the growers that sell at them (Podoll 2000). Some have investigated the effect on the community (Clancy 1997; Lockeretz 1986, Lyson et. al. 1995; the economic functions and the markets as alternatives to the global food market (Bragg 1996; Hendrickson 1997; Kloppenburg et. al. 2000; Stephenson and Lev 2000). When researching customers, it is a tempting to look at them as means to an end: local production, rather than an end in themselves, as will be explored through-out this thesis.

Research on customers has been looking at trends, preferences and characteristics (Lev and Stephenson 1998; Novak 1998) with a heavy preference for characteristics. Despite all the research, not much is known about the motivations behind local food purchases except that customers buy local food first for the quality and the variety and sometimes for the lower price. Customers also enjoy the atmosphere of the markets. The “inconvenience” of the market is the foremost reason that they do not shop there more often (Ryan, Streed, and Ragland 2001).

A Research Focus on Connectedness and Embeddedness

Feeling unsatisfied by the often economic approach to local food customer research, I envisioned a research study that would explore more of the inter-linkages in the concept of customer of local food. During this research these relationships emerged as connectedness implying the social relational aspects, and embeddedness suggesting the cultural expressive aspects of local food. My assumption is that the dimension of customer cannot be divorced from other dimensions of being (Douglas and Isherwood 1978). My research questions therefore are formed to capture more of each personal intricate weave of which only one thread is customer:

- What philosophical, ethical and/or sensory dimensions anchor interest in local food?
- How are motivations for purchasing local food socially embedded?
- What is the basis for sustained customer commitment to local food?

It was based on these questions that I designed my research.

Understanding the Local Food Culture

With the possibility now of reforming the way we approach food to encompass a more environmentally, socially, and morally accountable foodshed (Kloppenburg et al. 1996), we need a more comprehensive understanding of the culture of local food. Therefore, the reasons for this research are both academic and practical:

- To add more understanding to previous local food purchase research, involving the social embeddedness and the cultural dimensions of the motivations of local food customers.
- To add to social scientists' long-standing interest in the relationship between thought and action.
- To learn, from customers of local food how culture develops around and through local food.
- To provide politicians, city planners, growers and other interested parties a better understand of today's local food customers and the concept of local food.

Consumer studies have found that extrinsic motivation is not as enduring and able to predict behavior as intrinsic motivation is (Maddock 2000). In order to facilitate consumption, advertisers often utilize extrinsic motivators like coupons or similar offers. But this approach does not build loyal consumers. In contrast, the McDonald's Corporation has for some time been shaping intrinsic motivations in children. It does this through creating pleasurable experiences for children in a social, often family related setting (Schlosser 2001). These experiences become memories of togetherness and personal feelings of being special, which are values that the customer in turn wants to pass on to his/her children, creating an inter-generational customer. Extrinsic motivations, according to Maddock (2000) are more short-lived and therefore do not build loyal consumers. Assuming Maddock's theory of motivation is applicable for customers of local food, the durability of the local foods movement could be assessed in terms of values as intrinsic motivators. Ryan et al.'s (2001) study found that 99 percent of all farmers' market customers stated that they intended to shop again at farmers' markets next season. If they do, that could have a lasting effect on community life, the environment, local economy, food security, food safety and access to choice, as well as a voice in how, where and by whom food is grown. However, often intent is not the same as actual behavior. Whether the motivations are intrinsic or extrinsic might be the difference. It is

therefore important to document what the motivations are, how they are formed, and if they are different for different cohorts.

Some policymakers, according to a document originating at a national meeting of the regional Sustainable Agriculture Working groups (SAWGs), are working on re-designing and/or designing new food systems channels to allow for more extensive access to local produce in an attempt to promote social justice, community, and environmentally friendly food production. The report states that “USDA proposals in research education rural and cooperative development, credit, marketing and education should be directed towards support of local sustainable food production, processing and marketing” (Wilkins, 1995:153). Accessibility has become an important issue concerning local foods since quantitative research has established lack of convenient location as a deterrent. However, spatial location might not be all the customers are referring to when they check off “not convenient” on the consumer research questionnaire. It is important to understand more dimensions of customers in context, as these steps are taken to develop local food systems.

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter Two reviews both general and specifically customer oriented local food systems research. The theoretical framework for this research will be developed emphasizing how previous research has informed my research. Chapter Three presents the life history method and the data. Here the sample, interview guide, data collection and data analysis are described. In Chapter Four, I discuss the findings and develop the idea of a culture of local food. Chapter Five concludes the thesis by discussing the implications of these findings.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, I first present the developments that have led to the present interest and activity in local food systems. Next I will review previous research that focuses on customers in local/regional food markets. The research focuses on the roles that local food plays as an incubator for small business and in developing a sense of community. It explores the social demographics of local food buyers and why they find locally grown food attractive. In the third section I will look at theoretical frameworks for understanding customers and their food choices with the aim of better conceptualizing the “culture of local food”.

Between 1994 and 2000 in the United States, there was a 63 percent increase (to 2,863 markets by the year 2000) in registered farmers’ markets (USDA, 2000). It is estimated that the number could be doubled if locally organized but unregistered markets were included. It is further estimated that the registered markets contribute more than \$1.1 billion in sales to local economies (Burns and Johnson 1996). This marked upsurge in farmers’ market activity is one indication that locally/regionally produced food has taken on a greater significance in customers’ food choices. Another indication is that a growing number of food customers are joining Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects and buying locally grown food from health-food stores, or direct from farmers at their farms and roadside stands.

These trends raise questions concerning the motivational force(s) behind customers’ choices to buy locally/regionally grown food. In most cases, customers purchase directly from the grower(s) in addition to, but sometimes instead, of shopping at a conventional grocery store. These forces are important for the future of local food and could be for other areas as well, such as the environment and human

community. If motivations are anchored in concerns for the environment and the health of the local community, some speculate that local food production and consumption could become “a tool for action that can move us towards a more sustainable society” (Butler 2001). Others see local food purchasing as customers and growers motivated by moral convictions, acting together on their environmental and social moral responsibilities (Cone and Kakaliouras 1995). In the United Kingdom, farmers’ markets are considered “new consumption spaces.” Customers and growers are thought to be motivated by their personal concerns either as an alternative or as a reaction to global food, or to promote their philosophical beliefs concerning the environment, safe and secure food sources, and a living wage for local small growers (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000).

Other researchers question the idea that the local food market is an alternative to the global market at all. DeLind (1993:7) argues that many local food markets do not fully function as an alternative to the dominant agricultural food market, as they are too economically entrenched in their pursuit of niche markets “committed to external expansion and capital accumulation, dismissing the social dimension of sustainable agriculture.” An article in the popular press questions the strength of customers’ motivations, relegating them to a mere fashion statement by stating,

Heading off to the market, rummaging through piles of leafy objects, swapping gossip by the coffee urn and the tray of cinnamon twists, has taken on some form of urban-suburban chic in this age of plastic-wrapped produce at the supermarkets. Going to the market carries more than a little snobbery...a very yuppie sense of ‘Aren’t I hip?’ (Rhodus et. al.1994:13).

Farmers’ market customers have been seen as “consumers” in most local food research. They have been studied in their role as a means to strengthen local enterprises. Looking at customers as consumers has economic importance in the context of developing small entrepreneurial local food businesses. However, the concept of consumer suggests a market-focused, economic notion of human actors in the marketplace, and leads to research data focused on consumer *trends*,

preferences, and characteristics for the implicit purpose of marketing. This approach can miss the social context where growing, selling, buying, preparing, and partaking of food as a social and cultural expression of human connections and values takes place. In order to understand the research on the customer of local food, we must look at the customer in their social context of the local food market.

The Emerging Context For Local Food Markets

Concerns about the food system are growing. The critical importance of food and the power held by the industry that controls that food supply is well understood. Dwayne Andreas, a former chairman of Archer-Daniels-Midland Company stated:

The food business is far and away the most important business in the world. Everything else is a luxury. Food is what you need to sustain life every day. Food is fuel. You can't run a tractor without fuel and you can't run a human being without it either. Food is the absolute beginning (Quoted in Heffernan et al. 1999:15).

Since food in America has been relatively plentiful and affordable, American customers have not seemed to have great concerns about their food, until recently. Renewed interest in local food can be interpreted as new concern for the various dimensions related to food. Many reasons have been suggested for this upsurge. Foremost among them are customers' uneasiness concerning their loss of power over their own food sources (McMichael 2000). It has been suggested that they turn to local food as an attempt to reclaim some control and express concern about food safety and ethical issues.

Reclaiming Power

Some researchers have focused on the loss of local culture, values, and power caused by industrialization and the globalization of food. McMichael (2000) argues that industrialization changed and degraded the cultural basis of agriculture, and concludes that the local food movement is a counter movement to this loss of local values and power over one's own future. He argues that, "the power of food lies in its material and symbolic functions of linking nature, human survival, health, culture and livelihood as a focus of resistance to corporate takeover of life itself" (McMichael

2000:21). Wendell Berry (1996) also critiques the global centralized economy for the exploitation and destruction of local community and the loss of local power over one's own destiny due to the deliberate construction of global conglomerates that circumvent responsibility:

The great, centralized economic entities of our time do not come into rural places in order to improve them by "creating jobs." They come and take as much of value as they can take, as cheaply and as quickly as they can take it. They are interested in "job creation" only so long as the jobs can be done more cheaply by humans than by machines. They are not interested in the good health - economic or natural or human- of any place on this earth...these organizations are organized expressly for the evasion of responsibility. (Berry 1996:77-78).

The local food movement is sometimes understood as customer reaction to perceived loss of power over food supply, quality, procedures and source.

One way of reading FM [farmers' markets] is as an alternative space which offers a challenge to the dominance of the supermarket-productivist agricultural nexus. One respondent, for instance, wanted to stop "supermarkets killing trade". FM can thus be seen as a space in which producers and consumers can circumvent the consumption spaces constructed by powerful actors in the food chain. (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000:293)

In circumventing the mainstream production and marketing system, it can be imagined that growers and customers gain power over their own food sources, growing and marketing methods. Therefore, the local food system can be conceptualized as an alternative and reactionary space where customers are able to express with their food choices a "life style which embraces ecological, ethical and community awareness" and act on their apprehensions regarding "issues of food safety, and food quality " [Holloway and Kneafsey 2000:297]. O'Hara and Stagl, for example, conceive of the local food movement in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) as a

search for market alternatives that are re-embedded in their physical, social and ethical context. Thereby important dimensions of market interaction such as reliance on local experts, social

interaction, and spatial/temporal feedback functions can be recovered (O'Hara and Stagl 2001:533).

Thus, growers and customers are reclaiming control over food production in their local area.

Others have examined marketing methods used by local growers and argue that niche marketing is a

manifestation of the prevailing market mentality...committed to external expansion and capital accumulation....[and] At worst, because the concept depends on a set of assumptions about the nature of food production and distribution indistinguishable from that of the dominant agriculture/food industry, the latter co-opts the reform potential to be found within niche type farming alternative (DeLind 1993:47).

Because of this, local food, in and of itself, does not provide a guarantee that power over food production practices is returned to the local community. DeLind (1993) indicates that while the globalization of food has caused disconnects both physically and ideologically between food source and food customers, it is erroneous to conclude that a reconnect physically would also cause a reconnect ideologically.

The steps that caused this disconnect are of interest, since they place the concept of "local food" in the ever widening gap between customers' cultural context of social connections and ethical issues and global food production and marketing with its more economic focus on expropriation, exploitation and accumulation. Clancy (1997) traces the forces that over time separated growers from customer, placing more of the power over food in the hands of middlemen. The divergent objectives of customers and middlemen and lack of customer access to food production limit customer (and grower) power and increase distrust. A first distancing occurred when industrialization forced communities to become more dependent on food produced by unknown producers. A second distancing occurred during the chemical revolution. Chemical input undermined some eaters' trust in the safety of food and the integrity of producers. A third distancing came with the increasing amount of

additives introduced into food during processing, mainly to increase shelf life and convenience as well as visual and taste appeal. Kneen (1993) adds what could be considered a fourth distancing: the reconstitution of food to the point where the original product is no longer recognizable. It could be that, in the context that the initial distancing appeared, a strong customer reaction was not produced as power over food production was lost. Presently the distance between customer and producer has increased both physically and philosophically to such a magnitude that a counter reaction is demanded (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000; O'Hara and Stagl 2001).

Food Safety and Ethical Issues

Customers are reminded daily of food safety issues through news reports of e-coli outbreaks and Europe's (and most recently Argentina's) struggle with a meat supply compromised by foot-and-mouth disease. Concerns have also been raised about the safety of genetically modified organisms (GMO's), especially in Europe, but also in the United States. Some researchers believe this increase of information will lead to an even greater interest in local/regional food.

The more consumers learn about the ways their food is grown in far away places, the more many of them are concerned with where their food is produced, who produces it, and how it is produced. (Heffernan et al. 1999:15)

In addition to media exposure to the issue, many customers have first hand experiences of disease causing agents in their food. In a 1995 survey by the National Consumers League, 44 percent of its members said they had been victims of food poisoning (McNutt 1996). Another study among Missourians in 1995 established that 51 percent of food customers are very concerned about food safety when shopping for food, and that only 11 percent are not concerned (McNutt 1996).

Right on the heels of food safety concerns follows ethical issues concerning the sustainability of the chemical and fossil fuel intensive global food system. As the sustainability of the global food scheme is questioned, some point to what they see

as the irrationality of global food practices. Norberg-Hodge (1999) for example, noted that in 1999, Britain exported 111 million liters of milk and 47 million kilograms of butter, while at the same time importing 173 million liters of milk and 49 million kilograms of butter. She blames government investments and subsidies for this economically, environmentally and socially irresponsible system. She sees the re-emergence of local food systems as a sign that customers, as well as producers, are starting to understand food quality, safety and security issues, as well as ecological and social issues surrounding the shifting balance of opinion regarding global versus local food production. According to this view, customers are voting with their food dollars and small local growers are voting with their farming practices for a system informed by ethics as much or more as it is shaped by economic gain.

Balancing Divergent Grower and Customer Needs

Customers and growers who have come to some of the same conclusions concerning more local versus more global food may form a loosely integrated community founded on these common interests, beliefs, and/or values. However, customers and growers also have divergent needs involving the interplay of food security and viable economic return. The balancing of customer and grower needs involves “mediating entitlement and entrepreneurship” (Allen 1999:117). Following DeLind (1993), Allen questions whether “food security problems can be ameliorated through community-based, entrepreneurial efforts” (Allen 1999:125). She states that while the global food system has been able to narrow the gap between the haves and have-nots in regard to access to food, the local food system is threatening to again widen it. She argues that local food markets can, in fact, distance some customers from affordable food because “geographic proximity does not overcome social and economic distance and may increase it” (Allen 1999:120). On the other hand, Hinrichs (2000), concerned with the viability of local production, stresses the importance to the grower of an interplay between the social (offering affordable food to all community members) and the economic (generating a living wage).

Can both the customer's demand for food security (availability and affordability of good quality food) and for food safety (assurance that food is responsibly grown, harvested and marketed), and the grower's need to make a living, be satisfied by local food systems? Some customers who can afford higher prices argue that the prices are not really higher since the quality is so much better and their food dollar is being used to support local farmers and the local economy (Novak 1998). In reviewing the literature, other recent farmers' market surveys indicate that customers at farmers' markets expect the quality and variety of produce to be superior and the price to be lower than at the local grocery store (Rhodus et al. 1994; Ryan et al. 2001). Stephenson and Lev (2000), however, observe that customers of local food want competitive pricing as well as quality. It is of interest to note that Stephenson and Lev, who compared a white-collar and a blue-collar community, found that customers from the blue collar community were more likely to shop at a roadside stand, less likely to believe local is more expensive, and less willing to pay 10 percent more for local produce. In contrast, the white-collar community customers were more likely to belong to co-ops, believe local is more expensive, and were willing to pay at least 10 percent more for local produce. Stephenson and Lev suggested that pricing would have to be adjusted to fit each community.¹ Such a solution would raise ethical questions as well, if the local food system is attempting to support a more equitable food system than its global counterpart. One ethical issue concerns the fairness of charging different prices for the same product according to the ability to pay in order to maximize profit. Another ethical issue is whether different pricing would justify a quality difference, suggesting a food system stratified by quality of food with access qualified by socio-economic status.

¹ This strategy has been used before. At the turn of the 20th Century, City Market in Des Moines used a culture and price stratified system. Re-seller vendors, in white gloves, sold "local produce," whether truly local or not, for premium prices at the indoor City Market to Des Moines' white-gloved elite. The City Market vendors then also sold produce outside the City Market, without white gloves and for a lower price. Then again, the same vendor would sell their produce at a roadside stand further out from the city center where presumably use values of locally grown foods were high while monetary values were low (Solon 1998) If there was a difference in quality at these different locations is not known, but it is possible as it would make business sense.

The characterization of the average local food customer as having higher than average income and education could support Allen's and DeLind's arguments that local food could, in fact, increase distancing to affordable, quality food for some segments of the population (Allen 1999; DeLind 1993). However, the balance between the grower's and customer's needs is important for the viability of local food markets, as well as for both food security and food safety reasons. Therefore, it is important to know more precisely who these customers of local food are and how local food fits into their everyday lives. To do this we must more closely examine their motives for purchasing local food.

Customers as Consumers or Communicators of Culture

We can look at local food from at least two different perspectives: local food as a commodity and local food as the language of culture. These roughly parallel views of customers as consumers or as communicators. We will first look at *customers as consumers*, and then turn to look at them as *communicators in the language of culture*.

Customers as Consumers

Considerable research has approached customers of local food as consumers of a commodity. As one of the primary market places (besides health food stores, CSA projects, roadside stands and farms) where one can find local food, farmers' markets have been the focus of several recent studies concerning both growers and customers, most often approached as consumers. Recent studies have found some similarities among populations that make purchases at U.S. farmers' markets. The average customer as a consumer has been described as:

- *White* (Govindasamy et al. 1998; Nayga et al. 1995; Rhodus et al. 1994)
- *Older* than the average non-farmers' market food shopper (Govindasamy et al. 1998; Nayga, et al. 1995; Ryan et al. 2001)
- *Female* (Govindasamy et al. 1998; Nayga et al. 1995)

- *Higher than average income* (Govindasamy et al. 1998; Nayga et al. 1995)
- *Higher than average education* (Govindasamy et al. 1998; Lockeretz 1986; Ryan et al. 2001).

A profile of the average farmers' market consumer provides a target for marketing, but economically focused demographics do not help us understanding what motivates customers of local food.

Heffernan et al. (1999) suggest more knowledge of how "food is grown in far away places" would lead to an increase in food safety concerns and, therefore, increase customers' interest in local food. The higher education of local food customers lends some credence to this idea. It could also be that higher education exposes people to more varied food experiences and the local market is able to satisfy associated new demands. Or maybe higher education translates to higher income, making local food more affordable (assuming that it is more expensive). If prices rise to what a more educated market will bear, local food will no longer be an option for lower income less educated customers. There are no data, that I am aware of, to answer these questions. Might there be other ways, than demographics alone, to look at customers that would better reveal their motivations for purchasing local food?

Customers as Communicators of Culture

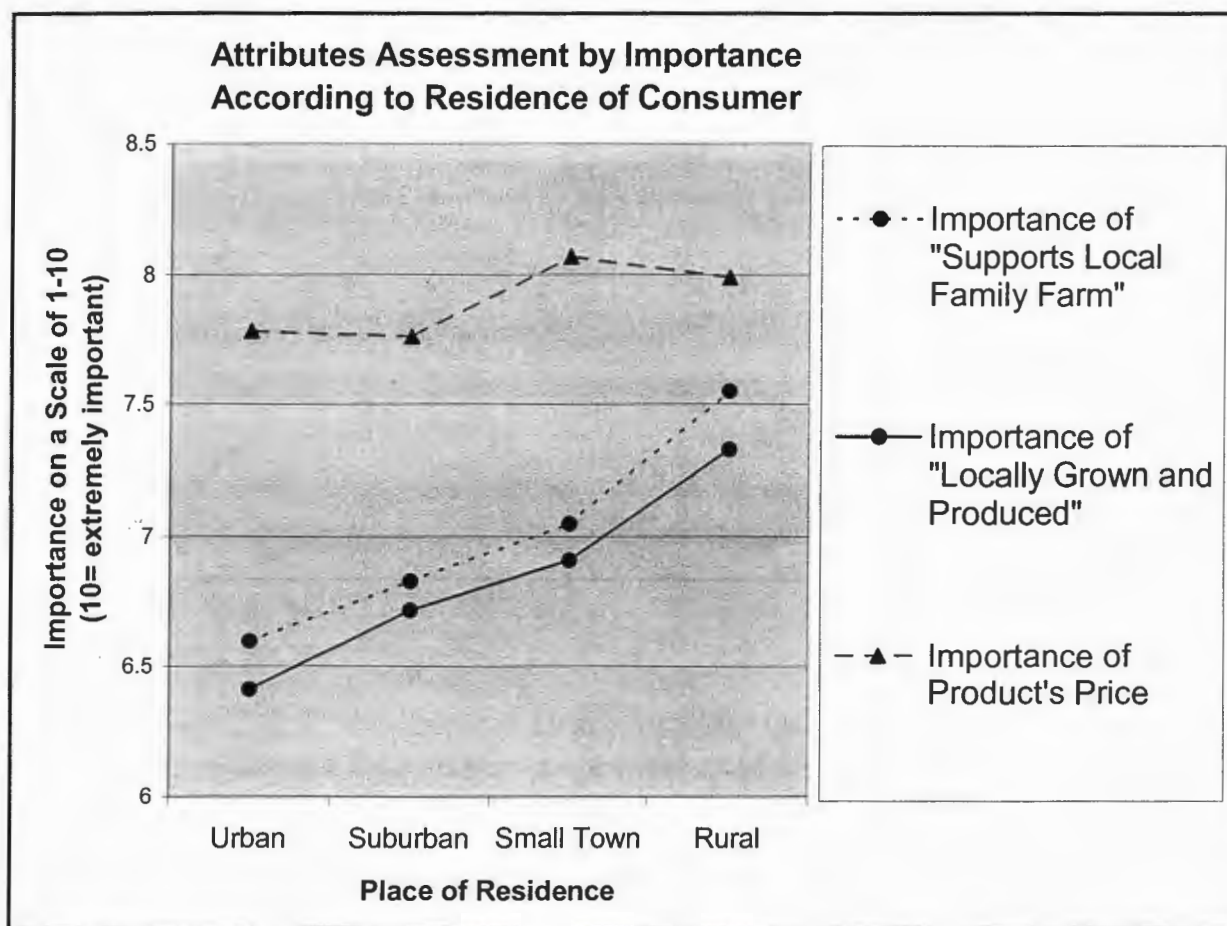
Customers as communicators of the language of culture can provide a more fruitful framework for understanding the motivations of customers of local food. Interestingly, research findings regarding traits and motivations of customers at farmers' markets, although often consistent, do vary across regions of the United States. In Ohio, Oregon, and Iowa studies, there are noteworthy differences.

In Ohio, the trend is toward farmers' market shopping increasing among those with incomes over \$35,000 and decreasing among those with incomes below \$25,000 (Rhodus et al. 1994). However, in Oregon support for local producers "cut[s] across

income and educational categories as well as community boundaries” (Lev and Stephenson 1998). In Iowa, no correlation between personal income and farmers’ market shoppers was found, but living inside or outside city-limits did make a significant difference, with city dwellers more likely to shop at farmers’ markets (Ryan et al. 2001). In Ohio, no significant difference was found between community size (i.e. large city, small city, town and rural area) and people’s opinion and behavior regarding shopping for food at farmers’ markets (Rhodus et al. 1994). These varied findings give rise to a new question: Are there other dimensions, besides economic signifiers of class, income and price, type of community, area of country, size and location of communities, that better capture the motivations behind customers’ local food choices?

A recent research project by the North Central Initiative for Small Farm Profitability (NCISFP) at the University of Nebraska studying 500 households in Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, and Wisconsin offers some interesting insights. The study involved a systematic random telephone survey of food customers where the place of purchase was not limited to farmers’ markets. Of these randomly selected customers from all age groups, almost all (99 percent) had purchased locally grown food. Previous farmers’ market research studies have found the age of customers of local food at farmers’ markets to be higher than the general population’s average age. However, the University of Nebraska study found that there is support within all food-purchasing age groups, with a small peak at 25-34 and 45-54 year olds in organic and natural food purchases. As in the Iowa study, the University of Nebraska study found one important difference: place of residence. Where the customer lives is a key factor in customers’ inclinations to favor local produce (See Figure 1). As the figure shows, the importance, of supporting “local family farm” and “locally grown and produced food” is strongly related to place of residence, while importance of price remains high for all places of residence (Zumwalt 2001). Urban residents give importance of “supporting local family farms” and importance of “locally grown and produced” around a 6.5, while rural residents give the same criteria around 7.5 on a

scale where 10 is the highest support. Although, the difference is not great, there is a difference between urban, suburban, small town and rural, with the strongest expressed support in rural areas and the weakest in urban areas. What then is different about place of residence, in this study, and how does this account for differences concerning how customers rate the importance of supporting local farmers and locally grown food while concern for price remains comparatively uniform?

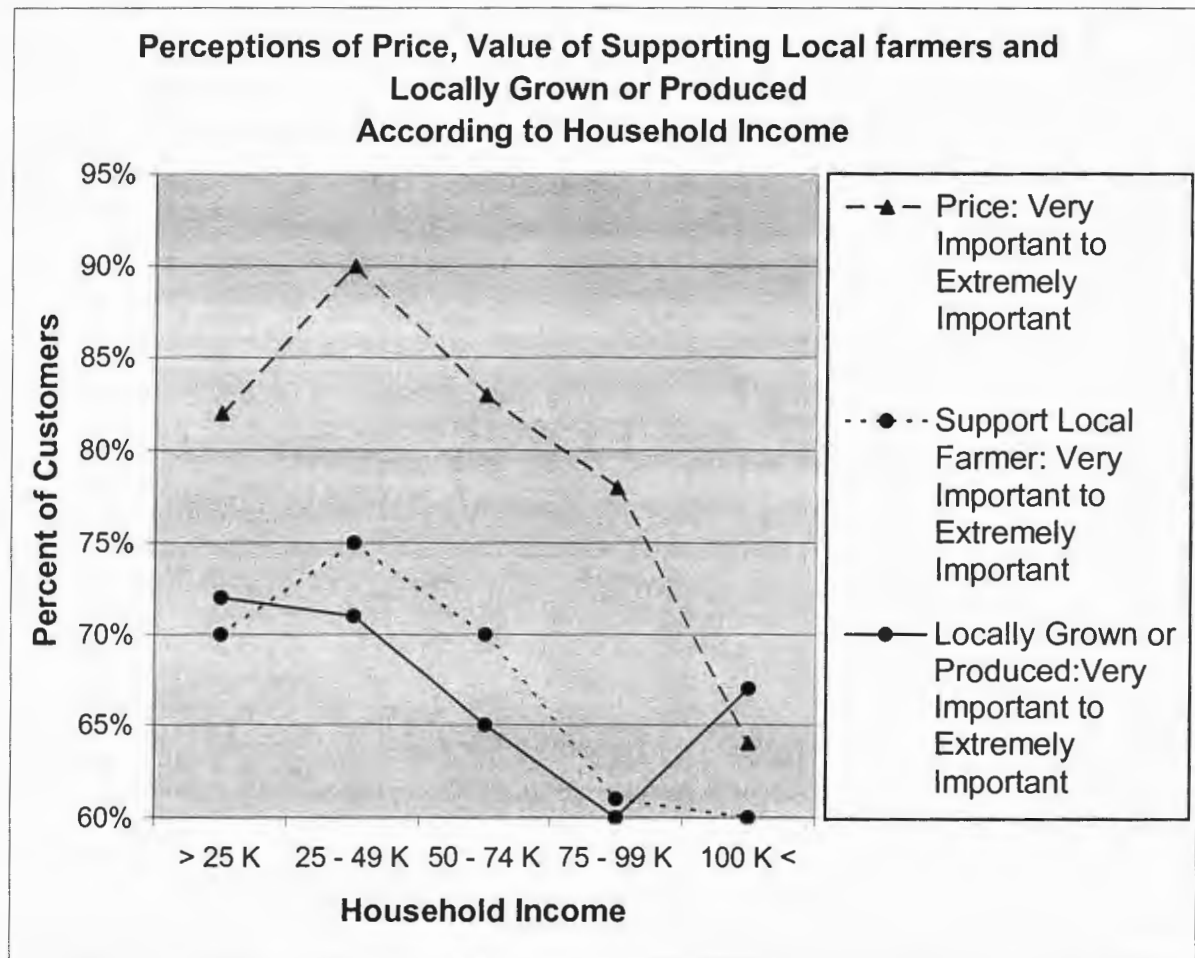


Source: Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Wisconsin consumer data, collected by North Central Initiative for Small Farm Profitability, University of Nebraska, October 2001.

Figure 1. Residence of Consumer and Attributes Assessments of Local Foods

Could the answer be found in economics? Maybe it is not place of residence but income that determines higher or lower support for local growers and local production. Could income levels account for these variations?

From the same study we learn that the highest expressed support for local farmer, but not for locally grown food comes from the \$ 25,000- \$ 49,000 income bracket, while the lowest support comes from \$75,000 - < \$100,000 incomes (See Figure 2). This could point to an income effect if we assume that the highest incomes are also the urban incomes. However, the differences are not great enough and we are not certain that the urban residents have the highest incomes or rural the lowest to say for sure what the relationship is.



Source: Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Wisconsin consumer data, collected by North Central Initiative for Small Farm Profitability, University of Nebraska, October 2001.

Figure 2. Household Income and Local Food Support

I would suggest that the surrounding social community with its culture and social identification with grower-neighbors trying to make a living from the land, might play a role in rural people expressing a slightly higher support for local growers. I would

also suggest that some rural residents, as a cultural expression, have a high use value for local produce. They have been accustomed to, for example, fresh tomatoes from the garden and have socially embedded cultural experiences connected to local food and therefore express a slightly higher support for local produce. In this sense, support for local growers may be socially embedded and culturally enacted in the rural community.

Lev and Stephenson (1998:1) found interest in local food “cutting across community boundaries and income and educational levels” but also found that the blue-collar and white-collar communities were likely to exhibit *different patterns* in acquiring local produce. This could as well be due to differences in income and status. However, if one believes that people are social beings, another plausible explanation is the effects of culture according to Geertz’s definition of culture as a:

historically transmitted *pattern of meanings embodied in symbols*, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life (Geertz 1973:89).

If blue-collar and white-collar people have, as a social group, adopted different cultural “patterns of meaning”, then they would exhibit different preferences and ways of acting as a cultural expression of commonly held concepts. Lev and Stephenson (1998) found that blue-collar customers most often buy at road-side stands, while white-collar customers join food co-ops. Griswold (1994:4) explains culture as “expressive aspects of human existence,” not unlike Geertz’s “patterns of meaning... expressed in symbolic form” and Peterson’s (2000:225) “culture as expressive symbols.”

What do blue-collar customers express by buying at roadside stands, and white-collar customers by belonging to co-ops? It could be argued that in some cultural constructs “finding a bargain” is highly valued, while in others it is not. Roadside stands might symbolize “bargain price” to some customers. In some sub-cultures, to belong to a club or co-op communicates a certain status, while in others it

represents exclusiveness, snobbery and restriction of personal freedom. Culture is created as actions and values are verified and promoted or disqualified and discarded through social interaction. Level of access to economic resources is part of that culture formation, but how these resources are valued, obtained, displayed, and used is socially and culturally constructed and developed. To say that cultural systems have no relationship to class and economics would be naive, but to say economics explains it all is equally naive. Culture, as a framework, in no way negates the power of money and status. It helps us understand how food, material products and behaviors are part of a whole system of meanings.

Another study of a small community in south-west Iowa found the population there to place high use value, but low exchange value on local produce (Solan 2000). The use-value and exchange-value were formed based on previous experiences and socially constructed feed-backs. High use value of locally grown food was associated with having grown up with fresh, garden grown vegetables and meat directly from the meat-locker. Low exchange-value was associated with having seen vegetables rot in the garden due to over-abundance. The characteristics were also associated with the cultural (expressive) meaning associated with local food being that of growing food to build community. Community members would freely share their harvest with each other to express values of community and neighborliness. Therefore, according to their cultural understanding and expression it would be unseemly to ask for money for local food. This cultural ethos was not conducive to small farmers who wanted local food production to be a way of making a living (Solan 2000). As we continue to examine the data, it seems that culture, in addition to age, education, or income level, is a useful perspective for understanding the motivations of customers (as well as producers) of local food.

Consumer research frames consumer motivations largely as “needs”. In contrast, the cultural framework allows for “connectedness” and identity as a motivation for

customer's actions. Confusing the two can lead to problems for consumer research, as we shall see later in the next section.

Consumer Theory vs. Sociological and Anthropological Customer Theory

This section compares several theoretical approaches to customer motivators, starting with more traditional consumer research based on traditional economic theory and a theory of congruency. I then turn to anthropological and sociological perspectives on culture, which offer an organizing framework for local food customer motivations. Just as local food customer motivations are socially constructed, our understanding of “consumer” or, “customer” in the case of local food has evolved informed by different theories. To understand “customer” in context, these different constructs, their contributions and lack, are important.

Consumer Theory: Fundamentals and Critiques

What approach can one take to gain an understanding of customer motivation? Consumer theory is an obvious place to start. According to traditional consumer research, there are three consumer decision-making perspectives: the traditional, the experiential and the behavioral influenced perspectives (Mowen 1993).

The traditional consumer decision-making perspective offers a linear model, within which consumers are thought of as making their purchasing decisions in a purely rational fashion. For 80 years, from the late 1800s until the 1970s, its five-stage consumer decision making process of problem recognition, search, alternative evaluation, choice, and post-acquisition evaluation, was not challenged much (Mowen 1993). Around 1970, coincidentally the same time that organized local food markets started to make their renaissance, researchers determined that people purchase experiences, as well as goods and services. Consequently, the experiential perspective and behavioral influence perspective were developed. Feelings and emotions relating to the shopping experience, as well as the effect of the shopping environment on purchasing decisions were identified as influences on consumer choice. At this time the concept of “impulse buying” was named. Sixty-

seven percent of grocery store purchases were thought to be impulse buys (Mowen 1993). Shopping was also understood as a search for variety and as preferred stimulation to avoid boredom (Mowen 1993). Although much of our understanding of customers of local food is based on these constructs, they do not completely explain the motivations behind local food purchases. They do not fully account for the observed variations in purchase behavior and choices based on place of residence. Nor do they adequately reveal how and why increased exposure to different cultures might increase interest in local produce and foods.

Another more recent, consumer studies approach, the Self-Congruency Perspective, offers a more socially derived explanation for customer motivations (Sirgy 2000). However, it also poses some problems, as we shall see later. This approach is somewhat related to the experiential perspective in consumer research, but provides potential space for reflecting cultural influences on purchases as well as how objects are carriers of culture and meaning. It is a cumulative congruency model. Sirgy (2000) explains the self-congruency perspective as the correlation between product, product user, point of sale image, and consumer self-concept. The detailed understanding of self-awareness needs is promising. However, Sirgy's model still falls short in its applicability to local food customers' motivations. The approach is fixed in quantitative methods, which do not fully take the role of values and workings of culture into account, nor how "local food" is used to communicate those shared values. The problem with Sirgy's model in relation to customers of local food is best described by Geertz's argument that the experimental scientific approach is in search of a law, while the qualitative approach to culture is a search for meaning (Geertz 1973). Shared meanings are an important source of congruency, maybe more important, to customers of local food than Sirgy's suggestions of congruency. Since meaning may be the key to local food motivation, Sirgy's ideas of congruency, if not specific interpretation and methods, hold some promise. Therefore, another approach must be sought. A modified congruency perspective that better describes customers of local food would include an understanding of personal and social

values and, ultimately, of personal and shared worldviews. This would suggest a more qualitative approach.

Anthropological and Sociological Perspectives on Customers

Customers of local food display a complex meaning-laden weave of personal and collective motivations. The more holistic approaches of sociology and anthropology may be more fruitful for understanding customers as more than consumers.

The anthropologists Douglas and Isherwood (1978) take economics to task for its narrow view of customer behavior, even noting harsh critiques from economists themselves concerning the “limitations of consumption theory” (Douglas and Isherwood 1978:20). Their primary complaint is that studies of consumption suppose that customers are motivated mainly by: “material welfare, psychic welfare and display” (1978:20). They further argue that traditional economic theory uses “taste” as a catch-all for what economists cannot explain in consumer behavior. Research on customers of local food, often coming from a sociological background, has attempted to understand “taste” by further dissecting it into its various parts, including convenience, privilege, status, food safety, and food security. Douglas and Isherwood argue that “the secret is the total pattern, and apart from that totalizing creative effort, no single peg or clue can hold the meaning without travestying it” (1978:10). They further argue that choices concerning food and other artifacts for living have to be seen in the context of social interactions, not as separate, individual exploits:

Consumption has to be recognized as an integral part of the same social system that accounts for the drive to work, itself part of the social need to relate to other people, and to have mediating material to relate to them.... Goods, work, and consumption have been artificially abstracted out of the whole social scheme (Douglas and Isherwood 1978:4).

People are social beings involved in creating meaning, therefore, the artifacts they acquire are also expressive symbols (Peterson 2000) and mediators of their individual and societal values.

Spaargaren (1997) further addresses the idea of customers as purchasers not only of products, but also of societal values. He states “products are seen as carriers or indicators of social processes that are hardly, or not at all, connected with or influenced by the user value of the product itself ”(Spaargaren 1997:161). Because these approaches view culture as an organizing framework for socially embedded motivations they may offer a richer and more complex understanding of local food customers’ choices.

Social Interaction

There is a difference between “connectedness” as a cultural expression of shared values and market researchers identifying the consumer’s “need for a relationship” with a global producer. In the 1990s, businesses in the United Kingdom supposed consumers had a need for a relationship with the producer, and therefore sought to enhance their connections with their consumers. However, what customers want, is to know “not just ‘what do you offer me?’ but also ‘what are they (the business) doing for society?’”(Rowan 1999:2). This line of reasoning suggests that customers are looking for connectedness based on shared meanings or values. This difference was not well understood by British businesses as they changed their strategies to facilitate consumer-producer relationships. Their approach failed according to customer research with 1,000 consumers in the U.K (Business and Management Practices, 2000). The U.K. companies found it hard to understand why 45 percent of their customers did not perceive that their “need for a relationship” had been met by the companies’ efforts, and why 57 percent of customers said they did not want a relationship in the first place. The reason, the research found, is that customers see this tactic as “nothing more than a glorified sales technique” (Business and Management Practices, 2000:1). Although this marketing research occurred in the United Kingdom and did not specifically focus on food customers, it suggests that customers who are looking for connectedness with food may desire something more than a relationship based on economic marketing principles and targeted advertisement campaigns.

In contrast to this U.K. research involving conventional non-food businesses, local food research has found that customers want and experience a connectedness or relationship with the producers who supply them and with each other. "Farmers' markets appeal to shoppers' desires to obtain... food... in a social atmosphere where the food provider can be directly encountered and supported " (Rhodus et al. 1994:13). Novak (1998:1-2) explains the Oregon farmers' market as:

a place to find...an atmosphere that invites relaxed chatter and socialization. Friends, old and new, stop to visit between purchases. Vendors exchange recipes and presentation advice with customers, sharing their problems with the wet spring or concerns about an early frost.

Ryan et al. (2001) found that such interaction even increases the perception of the product's quality in the customer's mind. In their study of Iowa customers of local food, 88 percent of the customers interviewed preferred to deal directly with the producer-farmer, and 90 percent felt they receive a better product when they engage in a face-to-face transaction with the producer. This suggests a level of social interaction in the local food market that cannot be imitated by clever mass marketing. Such interaction may convey and affirm shared meanings or values, and thereby construct culture.

In some communities, social interaction serves the community in additional ways. One example is the Davis Farmers' Market in California which plays an important role in building community (Podoll, 2000). The market there functions as a hub for community activity related to political issues and candidates, non-profit organizations, and as a showcase for school activities. According to Podoll, citizens' community ownership is increased through these interactions. At a time when civil society and community involvement in the U.S. is declining (Putnam, 2000), horizontal social interaction is an important function derived from the local food system. The social space created in the local food market may be built on common interests and values, which are supported, reinforced and reinvented as growers and customers share their humanness, experiences, views, and values with each other.

Culture as an Organizing Framework

Culture provides orientation and direction for human beings and wards off chaos by providing order and meaning. In 19th century Europe, “high culture,” the arts and music of the aristocracy, was used as a reaction towards the “ugly aspects of industrialization” (Griswold 1994:4). At the time “everything seemed to be evaluated on an economic basis” and in response, culture was perceived as –“entailing the wisest and the most beautiful of human effort” (Griswold 1994:4). Later, culture in sociological research came to mean values, norms, beliefs, or expressive symbols (Griswold 1994). Values are defined as what is of worth or considered desirable to a specific group. Norms are the expected way of acting in any given social group and beliefs are how the group perceives the universe to function (Griswold 1994). More recently, culture has come to mean all these things, including the artifacts used by a specific group (Geertz 1973). The food we eat, including how and where we do so, can be considered expressive symbols representing personal and social values, norms, and/or beliefs. Culture, so defined, is an expression of identity, shaping the meaning of life. It attempts to answer the question that Tolstoi posed: “How shall we live?”(Griswold 1994:6).

However, the formation and development of culture are matters for discussion and debate. In sociology, Weber, contends that social life reflects culture rather than the other way around (Griswold 1994). According to Peterson (2000), reception theory developed in the 1970s by American Communication Studies made a different argument. It negated the effects of culture altogether, and generally argued that consumers are passive receptacles, largely unaware of the culture they are being sold. Peterson proposes another alternative, not based on culture as a reflection of societal values, but culture as socially and individually derived active choices:

If production was viewed as deliberate rather than determined by social values, it seemed reasonable to suppose that consumption was not passive, haphazard or entirely determined by societal values. Rather it must be the result of many active choices made by individuals and informal groups. This has now become the ‘auto-production of culture’ (Peterson 2000:229).

Peterson argues that his research subjects, customers of music, are not passive vessels for mass produced goods, but rather sort through what is being offered and “actively select among and radically recombine the cultural elements on offer in an effort to symbolize their own identities and give meaning to their lives”(Peterson 2000:229). Looking at global food, customers of local food might agree with Peterson’s view of “production...as deliberate [in the sense of being designed for economic profit, compromising other values] rather than determined by societal values [that also include other concerns such as sustainability, the environment, and social justice]”(Peterson 2000:229). In contrast, what local food customers may be seeking is a food system more founded on socially constructed values, that encompass more of the varied needs of human society and the environment.

Seeking an alternative to the dominant system through sub-cultures can be conveyed by the idea of “transformatory resistance” (Peterson 2000). Transformatory resistance addresses the idea that the sub-culture often is formed in opposition to the dominant mass-produced culture. This act is reminiscent of how I started this chapter by noting that researchers of local food differ in their perception of whether local food is “transformatory resistance” or simply an economic response to another niche market (DeLind 1993). Using Peterson’s model, it could be either, since mass-production and auto-production cycles both feed off each other.

Elements of the auto-produced cultural items are re-appropriated by the culture industry and sold back to the people again, thus commodifying the symbols of resistance, and the cycle begins again... If resistance is made through the auto-production of mass-produced culture, the cultural symbols of resistance are now routinely coopted by elements of the culture industry, sanitized, reappropriated and mass-marketed back to what they see as ‘consumers’ (Peterson 2000:230).

I already discussed an attempt to commodify culture in the British businesses’ attempts to use “relationship” as one of its marketing strategies. It failed for an important reason: mass marketing can commodify the symbols of culture, but not the

foundation of culture, which is social. There are other problems with this model, for example: How can *auto-production of culture* and *mass-production of culture* be determined? Where does one start and the other end?

These various theories and models are useful for the present study. Sirgy's congruency model offers some insight into the relationship between customers' own symbols of meaning and those of the local food market. Douglas and Isherwood's pattern of motivations encourages a more holistic look at customers by proposing that the "the meaning of each is in relation to the whole"(1978:9). This pattern of motivation was the beginning of the search for a culture of local food. Spaargaren's ideas of food as carrier of social processes provided another piece towards culture as a framework for local food customers which was further developed by looking at local food as a cultural object or a expressive symbol as suggested by Griswold. Peterson's active selection and mass-production's co-opting of culture and transformatory resistance provides yet further tools to look at local food motivations. Finally, and as the overarching framework for looking at customers of local food, Geertz' interpretation of culture as a social system to develop and maintain meaning about life, are useful for the present study. They all contribute to an understanding of the underlying social interactions, experiences, and values, which form the customers' motivations for buying local food. They point to the developing food systems movement being part of the dynamic of culture.

Anthropologists have learned that individuals in different social groups communicate who they are and what they believe about their world through rituals, objects and the food they eat. In the next chapters, we will observe that customers of local food comprise such a group. Like the members of a tribe, they communicate, verify and reconstruct their values, norms and beliefs through social interaction. Their "community" spans geographies and associates likeminded growers, chefs and other customers. Together they construct the culture of local food, based on their shared experiences and values systems. Through this tribal membership, a life

meaning emerges and identities are constructed and validated. The next chapter will introduce the research methods used and the customers interviewed for this study, But first I will define some terms and their use in this study.

Definition Of Terms

Several terms used throughout this study require some definition. These terms are values, attitudes, expressive symbols, the cultural object, meanings, culture, customers and consumers.

According to Pepper (1958), values can be defined as “likes... preferences... duties, moral obligation, aversions and attractions and other modalities of selective orientation in the universe of selective behavior.” Peterson (2000:225, 229) argues that culture is neither “normative values” nor “abstract norms,” but is instead “expressive symbols,” which are adopted and recombined by individuals and groups, and become “the source of their identity.” However, this research suggests that the expressive symbols are a representation of socially derived and personally held values. I will also use “expressive symbols” with the idea that “expressive symbols”, are a manifestation of values concerning local food, which emerge as Geertz’s “patterns of meaning” (Geertz, 1973:89). These patterns of meaning are the framework of what I have come to see as the “Culture of Local Food”. When speaking about local food as a cultural object, I will be using Griswold’s definition of “cultural object” as “shared significance embodied in form” (Griswold 1994:11). In short, local food is the cultural object that symbolizes shared significance and tells the story of these commonly held meanings.

I will differentiate between customer and consumer. I agree with Kneen who says of the consumer:

Like pig (or pork) is turned into product, persons are turned into consumers, and consumers are only valued if they have the money to become consumers. The value of consumers is directly related to their function as a means of getting rid of product, like a Dispose-All

garbage can, or just another length of tubing to the cosmic plumbing system (Kneen 1993:31).

Customer, on the contrary, has its roots in customs, which suggests social interactions. Therefore, in this study, I will use “consumer” and “customer” to note differences of perception and approach regarding buyers of local food. “Consumer” will be used when the cited research applies that label and when discussing more economic approaches to people who purchase local food. In all other instances, I will refer to buyers of local food as “customers” to emphasize their embeddedness in the context of social relationships through customs and culture.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Research on customers of local food has contributed a wealth of data on the demographics of local food customers and their preferences concerning local food and local food markets. However, in the desire to understand the marketing aspects of local food, much research has focused on the narrower investigation of customers as mere consumers. This has obscured some of the important linkages between customers, growers and local food and the implications of these relationships for the family, community and food system.

An understanding of the significance people assign to their actions is essential for understanding motivations and how these reasons are anchored in social relations. In exploring culture, Clifford Geertz (1973) argues that the qualitative approach is a search for meaning. The relationships between local food and local food customers and growers are multi-faceted and inter-linked, creating a special kind of meaning. By using a qualitative approach, a fuller understanding of local food customers can be developed that conveys the complexities and occasional contradictions of human motives, values and choices.

Life History Method

The life history method (LHM) is particularly well suited for studying local food customers for two reasons. First, using LHM facilitates access to the complexities and wide variety of experiences as antecedents to action, values and norms that interact to produce social reality. Second, it is a methodology that permits exploration of change over time (Miller 2000).

Life history method deserves some explanation. It has been used in the social sciences in both anthropology and sociology. Its source, biography, is a literary genre that has been practiced since the time of St. Augustine (Miller 2000). According to Miller, in the early 1900s the life history approach became the central

method in “the Chicago School”, which was the center of sociological thought and study at the time. During the 1920s and 30s, the Chicago School used only two methods: quantitative analysis and life history. For a time following the 1930s, life history fell into disuse as quantitative methods gained favor in the social sciences, but the social upheaval of the 1960s brought a renaissance for qualitative methods. They emerged in sociological and anthropological studies as tools to gain access to the social worlds of human groups. Of the qualitative methods, life history especially served a need to explore in-depth processes of change that were not discernable by quantitative methods. As human experience in the 21st century presents complex social realities in a process of constant change, life history is again a promising sociological research tool.

Despite its promise, researchers have questioned the accuracy and utility of the life history method since memory studies have been examined more closely and found to have lower accuracy than previously thought. Since life history does rely heavily on people’s recollection, this may present a liability. However, often even if peoples’ memories are not fully accurate, they still convey their inner motivation whether constructed from real memories or perceived ones. The construction is of more interest than the actual occurrence. In *The Sociological Imagination*, C.W. Mills (2000) wrote that “people’s perceptions are real in their consequences” and I believe that can be observed through the use of the life history method.

Researchers have utilized life history research using three different approaches – *the Realist, the Neo-Positivist and the Narrative* (Miller 2000). They differ mainly in theory building and the role of the interviewer.

- a) *The Realist* is an inductive approach in that it constructs “general principles concerning social phenomena” (Miller 2000:11). It is based on grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990) accessed through factual empirical methods. The survey tool is unfocused interviews and reality emerges from the interviewees.

The interviews are ended when a saturation point has been reached with little or no new information emerging.

- b) *The Neo-Positivist* is a deductive approach as it relies heavily on previous research and its main interest is theory building and/or theory testing. It relies on question guides to access specific areas of interest. The interplay between actor (the interviewee) and structure is of foremost interest.
- c) *The Narrative* is a more fluid approach where reality emerges as a construct between interviewer and interviewee interaction. "Questions of fact take second place to understanding the individual's unique and changing perspective" (Miller 2000:12).

This study combined elements of the Realist and Neo-Positivist approaches to the life history method.

Study Location

The sample of local food customers was selected through vendors at a farmers' market in Des Moines, Iowa. Des Moines is the capital of Iowa and located in Polk County. The capital is a center for the insurance and financial industry, higher education, health care and life science industries. Polk County has a population of 374,601(2000) with a population increase of +14.5 % between 1990-2000 and a per capita income of \$28,271, while Iowa per capita income was \$23,925, and the U.S. national per capita income in the same year was \$26,412 (Department of Commerce 2002).

The Des Moines Farmers' Market is a large city market with about 240 vendors. It is a vibrant and culturally diverse market with thousands of customers. The market is open every Saturday morning from seven A.M. to noon starting on the last Saturday of May and ending on the last Saturday of October. It features a wide variety of vendors and produce including fresh locally grown fruit, vegetables, flowers, fish and red and white meat, value added and prepared food as well as crafts, art, clothing and entertainment.

I concentrated on the Des Moines Farmers' Market since I could expect access to a wide diversity of customers there. I soon realized that this urban market was actually several different markets to different people groups, so the study was designed to focus primarily on a group of customers identified by vendors as "interesting customers", within the criteria for selection described below. The customers this selection technique generated varied in gender, place of childhood experiences and ages, but were somewhat homogeneous with respect to race, education and income.

Selection Of Interviewees

The objective of this study was to improve understanding of the motivations of customers who are committed to buying local food. Five vendors at the Des Moines Farmers' Market, whom I had previously interviewed (Solan 1999), served as my key informants². I asked these vendors to supply me with contact information for customers of different ages, gender and from different rural, urban or agricultural backgrounds to tap as broad a range of customer experience as possible. From their recommendations, I selected 12 interviewees. Table 1 presents some of the characteristics of the sample, which I divided into a younger cohort (ages 20-39), a middle cohort (ages 40-59) and an older cohort (ages 60-79). Three of the customers interviewed were referred by a specialized vegetable grower; one by a more diversified vegetable grower; two by a pork, chicken, egg, apple and honey direct marketing growers network; two by a vegetable, fruit and chicken CSA (Community Supported Agriculture); and four by a sheep producer. To protect the privacy of the customers, pseudonyms were chosen and are used throughout this thesis.

² "Key informants are knowledgeable, articulate 'insiders' possessing a unique perspective on the social action in the site where the fieldwork is unfolding"(Schwandt 1997:17).

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample

CUSTOMERS	COHORT	BACKGROUND (CURRENT AND CHILDHOOD)
"Katarina"	younger	Urban with agricultural roots ("ag. roots" implies a more extended exposure)
"Anna"	younger	Urban
"Gretchen"	younger	Urban with agricultural roots
"Danielle"	younger	Suburban
"Lisa"	middle	Urban with agricultural experiences ("ag. exp." implies a visiting knowledge)
"Erik and Kami"	middle	Suburban with agricultural roots
"Chad"	middle	Rural with rural roots
"Jeremy"	middle	Urban with agricultural roots
"Bob and Mary"	older	Suburban with rural childhood
"Peter and Ann"	older	Urban with urban roots
"Kurt"	older	Urban with rural experiences
"Annette"	older	Urban with urban roots

Position and Interest of the Researcher

I grew up in Sweden and spent my summers in a rural agricultural environment. My summer play-mates were all children whose daily lives included farm chores and other farm related experiences. I learned early on that their lives were different from mine. I was intrigued by the differences and thankful for the generosity of my summer friends in sharing their experiences with me, a city kid. Bringing home the cows for milking, gathering the eggs for dinner, being horrified by the huge rats in the grain loft, hanging the hay and later, with pitchforks, loading it onto wagons to bring into the barn, were all part of my long Swedish childhood summers. My favorite summer memory is of jumping in the hay and building hideaways in the hay mow. Due to my own pleasant childhood experiences of country life, I could readily, and sometimes nostalgically, identify with the childhood stories of my interviewees about agricultural experiences and I was reminded of my summer friends through the stories of the rural and agriculturally rooted customers.

My interest in the market is almost exclusively social. Our oldest daughter, Katherine, first interested me in going to the Des Moines Farmers' Market about four or five years ago and I have enjoyed my visits there ever since. She is a great cook and goes there for the food, the colors, the variety and the experience. I am almost embarrassed to confess that it is not the local food that draws me to the market; it is the great variety of people and the social interactions. My husband is from New York and we lived in an Italian neighborhood in upstate New York. We would run into our Italian friends in a store and they would say: "Hey, what are you doing tonight? Wanna come over for dinner? Bring your mom too." This was so different for me, coming from a more reserved Scandinavian background and I loved the spontaneity of it. The farmers' market here in Iowa does that same thing for me: It causes me to share the joy of being human together with other humans. I revel in seeing the different ages, genders, cultures and ethnicities represented there; the social interactions that take place; and the family groups of three or even four generations shopping there together. Going to the market for me is drinking in community and savoring social interaction at its best. Therefore, my "biases", at the outset of this study, include 1) positive attitudes towards people who practice small-scale family focused agriculture, and 2) a life long interest in social interactions and the effect of culture on people's life experiences, as well as life experiences' effect on culture formation.

The Interview Guide: Oral and Pictorial Dimensions

The interview guide was developed to assist interviewees in talking about their relationship to local food over time. The guide has three sections: Life history interview and drawing activity, a historical matrix and a questionnaire for specifics. Previous farmers' market customer research was considered in developing a guide that might yield a more detailed understanding of relationships and meanings. The interview guide was reviewed by members of my program of study (POS) committee. After revision, the guide was submitted for review, along with other

documentation, to the Iowa State University Human Subjects Review Board and was subsequently approved. The interview guide appears in Appendix A.

Each interview followed a chronological approach in accordance with the life history method, starting with the first food related memory and ending with current situation. To encourage maximum interaction with the experience of local food and discovery of diverse motivations, I included a drawing activity in the interview design. For this purpose, I purchased a large sketchpad and colorful pencils. The sketchpad had to be large enough to invite and not hamper drawing, while small enough to accommodate whatever table was made available during the interviews. The pencils had to be fun and inviting to encourage creativity of thought and desire to draw. I started each session by letting the interviewee choose a pencil, hoping to convey both a sense that they were in control of the interview and that it would be a fun experience. Before the interviews I had drawn and labeled my own "food interaction history", taking care to use Swedish, my native language, as I labeled my experiences so as not to influence the interviewees. I showed my life history drawing to the interviewees before the interview to give them an idea of what I was looking for (See Appendix B). The Swedish had an unexpected added benefit. It was a good ice-breaker preparing the way for relaxed sharing, as we talked and laughed about what were, to the interviewee, strange words. After a short explanation, I encouraged the interviewee to draw or doodle his or her food experiences while talking about them. Two of the male interviewees found it too hard to draw and talk at the same time. One elected to take small breaks from talking while he drew his experiences and the other just talked without drawing. One of the female interviewees got so involved talking about her convictions and thoughts about food and nutrition that she forgot to sketch and I did not remind her as I thought it would interfere with the flow of her thoughts. The rest of the interviewees all drew and labeled their sketches with enthusiasm as they shared their experiences and thoughts. The drawing added surprising dimensions of understanding for both the interviewee and myself. It seemed to aid some of the interviewees who might be

more visually than verbally inclined to access and communicate their relationship to food. The visual and vocal renderings brought out areas of food interactions and thoughts that otherwise might have been obscured and the drawing experience was fun for both the interviewee and me. Some of the drawings, or part of a drawing, are displayed in the text and all of the drawings are included in Appendix C. When the area of food related memories seemed to be exhausted, I asked the interviewee to explain how food choices were made at different life stages. I recorded this in a matrix, also included in Appendix A. The interview was concluded with a few direct questions concerning what “locally grown food” means to the interviewee and if the availability of locally grown food has changed during his/her lifetime. There were also a few questions about their relationship to farmers’ markets. The questionnaire ended with a few questions concerning self-definition, age, and other community involvement. Both the matrix and the questionnaire are included in the appendix.

The realist approach is evident, as the interviewees were encouraged to explore their own reality within their personal framework. For example, I had supposed, while constructing the interview guide, that local food purchases are intimately connected with previous rural food experiences and therefore had fashioned probes concerning early experiences with home-grown food suggesting a rural environment. During the interviews, interviewees firmly redirected the approach and insisted on the effects of urban food experiences as precursors to current local food purchases, making urban experiences emerge as important antecedents to local food preferences. Another example is that I predicted that habits developed during previous experiences had led to local food purchases, more in line with Swidler’s (1986) theoretical frame work suggesting “style, habits and skill” as a determinant of action. However, interviewees repeatedly attributed their actions of buying local food to “values” they developed and embraced as a result of previous experiences. For example, “inconvenience”, referring to the physical location of the market, was mentioned in previous local food research as a deterrent to buying local food. This could be interpreted as customer shopping habits being incongruent with physical market location. While part of the

answer, the relatively low cultural values associated with food compared with European food shoppers emerged from the interviews as a factor contributing to the experience of “inconvenience”, maybe even more than the actual physical location of the market. As interviewees embraced their own values associated with local food, the physical location of the market, as a determining factor, seemed to decrease.

The Neo-Positivist approach was evident in the design of the question guide as it was based on and informed by previous research. The relationships between motivation and action and changes in these relationships were explored through the question guide in order to add understanding to previous local food research and test the theory behind it (the previous discussion of “inconvenience”). However, more in line with the realist approach, the prime concern during the life history interviews was to allow interviewees to explore their social realities as they knew them.

Conducting the Interviews

I contacted the customers through telephone calls. Of the twelve customers I contacted, no one refused and all readily agreed to an interview although it involved a morning, noon or evening time commitment in their busy schedules. Some of the reasons for participation revealed during the interviews included genuine personal interest in or commitment to local food, feeling flattered to be recruited for a university research study, the conviction that the research might help “their” vendor succeed, and just plain curiosity.

The interviews were conducted face to face. They occurred in the interviewees’ home, place of work or at a local restaurant and lasted from one to two and a half-hours. The interviews were taped and transcribed by a paid transcriber and me. As the interviewees were asked to recall food memories from early childhood to the present, most of them (as explained previously) also drew and labeled their memories on a sketch pad. I asked the interviewees to start with their first food memory, to go as far back as they could remember and go on from there. Many of

the interviewees were surprised that an early food memory was so readily available. For others it took a little longer as they explained that they had never been asked to think about this before. Once under way, most customers remembered, talked about and drew pictures of their experiences, thoughts, actions and their emerging and changing values related to food. One interviewee sent me an email the day after the interview with further reflections. The email was included in my database. If probes were used, they included such things as: consider where your food came from, who was involved, what was considered special occasion and everyday food and what different strategies did you use concerning food choices at different life stages. The interviews were concluded with some specific questions about the interviewee's age, what "local food" means to them, their relationship with farmers' markets and their other community involvements.

Analysis of the Interviews

After all the interviews were conducted, taped and transcribed, the transcribed interviews were copied into NVivo (1999), a qualitative data-managing software program. During the actual interviews and while transcribing and analyzing the interviews, twelve main areas of interest emerged relating to previous experiences, values and values formation and quality of life issues and these were coded using NVivo. The twelve coded areas were values, experiences, image, life stages and change, local food and art, portability and brand community, differences buying local in U.S. and Europe, meaning of local, community involvement, shopping at farmers' markets, availability of local food and stories. The different areas were defined in NVivo and divided into subsets totaling 32 nodes. Each coded area, or node, was analyzed as a unit.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

Customers of local food are an enigma in the world of food consumers. In a society that is moving toward processed and precooked foods, they look for unprocessed farm-direct food. Among consumers who are increasingly looking for convenience, they go out of their way to find local growers at farmers' markets. Quality and freshness have been mentioned as important reasons for buying locally grown food. However, some customers offer a more socially derived reason: to support local economy and community. In a study of farmers' market customers in Black Hawk County in Iowa (Ryan et al. 2001), 81 percent believed that buying locally grown food supports local agriculture, yet the percentage of those who actually bought local food was lower than 81 percent. According Burns and Johnson (1996:1), the "national fruit and vegetable sales through direct marketing have been estimated at \$1.1 billion or more in the last couple of years." However, \$1.1 billion is only 0.25 percent of the total \$ 400 billion general food market. This may indicate that values are not good predictors of action, or that customers do not value local agriculture and a healthy local economy although they say they do, or that there are other factors involved that have yet to be explored. It has been suggested that price and convenience are important indicators of whether a person will buy local or not. Yet there are people that make the decision to buy local food regardless of price and convenience (Stephenson and Lev 2000). What factors motivate them?

In this research, it became evident that customers of local food have strong values connected with food. However, the origin of these values is not as much economically derived as it is culturally influenced, maintained, and anchored. The values are derived from previous experiences in social settings. Buying local food is a representation of communally, as well as personally held values, beliefs, and meanings. The local food customers in this study are, through their food choices, in

search of a way to communicate and reinforce those values, beliefs, and meanings, sometimes with hopes to change the food system at large. There are researchers who argue that “Any culinary system is attached to, or part of, a worldview” (Fischler 1988:281). This research is about the “culture of local food”: the personal and communal beliefs and values held about the world by twelve customers of local food in the mid-west and how the values and beliefs become the meaning behind their choices to buy locally grown food.

This chapter has three main sections. The first section looks at dimensions of local food as a cultural object as revealed in the customers’ accounts. The second section suggests how local food develops into a personal story of meaning and values through the customers’ previous social experiences. The final section develops the concept of “culture of local food” by exploring the congruencies between the characteristics of the cultural object “local food” and the meaning of local food according to the customer’s perceptions.

Dimensions of Local Food as a Cultural Object

Although the cultural object can never be fully understood apart from its story, I find it useful to first examine the dimensions of local food concerning what it is (or symbolizes to the customer) as features and what it does (or is perceived to do according to the customer) as functions. The concept of “local food” is an evolving, culturally based concept surprisingly consistent among the customers, with features and functions so specifically defined that customers recognize these dimensions in such diverse settings as “being a child in Grandpa’s garden” and “dining in a Bistro in the heart of Paris.” How do these customers of local food make these connections? First, local food is perceived as “food that is grown in this area” with the geographic and political boundary of “state” as the outer spatial limits. According to Kurt, who is an urbanite with rural experiences and from the older cohort, “locally extends to the state of Iowa, but particularly central Iowa.” However, “close-by” is also an important attribute of local. “Close-by” is defined by the location of the

customer. “[Local means] not traveling more than an hour or an hour and a half from where I live,” says Chad, who lives in a rural area and is from the middle cohort. This would imply that if the customer is mobile, so is the concept of “local”. This is, indeed, confirmed by the way customers talk about local food as they travel to other countries and return home again. Furthermore, the different dimensions (functions and features) and “the story” of local food (as we will explore later), rather than the spatial location seem to be an even stronger influence of what these customers perceived as “local food”. Therefore, to these customers, local food is both place-centered and portable. To better understand this, we need to investigate local food as a cultural object defined as “shared significances embodied in form” (Griswold 1994:11). Therefore, we will begin by exploring what local food is and what it does, according to the customers that were interviewed.

The main features which customers assign to local food are first, *product excellence* based on freshness, nutritious quality, more variety, and more sensuous appeal and second, *transaction superiority* attributed to the local food provider expressed as personal, trustworthy and morally responsible. The functions embedded in the customers’ concept of local food are the ability of local food to connect or bridge the gaps between the customer and the good life represented by healthy natural food; the customer and the source through the transactional superiority; the customer and his/her previous, current, and future social relationships and contexts; the customer and his/her understanding and ability to partake of other cultures. Local food serves another function as well: that of facilitating identity formation, as we will consider more later in this thesis. To the individual customer, these features and functions symbolize different characteristics that are important to the quality of their experience, especially the attribute of “trust” which consistently appears in connection with their descriptions of local food.

Product Excellence

From the older cohort and with a rural background, Bob defines local both by what it is and what it is not in order to convey that it can be trusted. “I know what real locally grown food is. It is fresh food that has never been sprayed. It is not a GMO (Genetically Modified Organism) seed. It is a real seed that is not imported from other countries that do strange things with their seeds.” There is a delicious contradiction in Bob’s comment - a perception that “other countries do strange things with their seed”, yet, genetic engineering is strongly U.S. originated. Jeremy, who is younger than Bob and an urbanite with agricultural roots, says “quality is the main thing”. He’s referring directly to the freshness and naturalness of local food.

For some customers, local food provides a possible route to health and well-being through improved nutrition. Bob was recently diagnosed with cancer. He intensely distrusts the medical profession which he perceives as driven by the economic influences of the pharmaceutical industry. Bob explains:

They did a biopsy and said that I had prostate cancer. (I) was recommended chemotherapy or radiation. (I asked about) side effects. (I was told) you could become impotent or wear diapers for the rest of your life.

Bob decided to try nutrition instead. He found a grower who has several medical degrees but has left the medical profession, discouraged by what he experienced as a high failure rate of modern western medicine. This medical professional and his wife (who had also worked in the conventional medical system) have become farmers in order to provide people with good food to combat disease. Bob is convinced that in buying local food, he is also purchasing his health. He feels fortunate to have a source of food from people who share his beliefs about food. Bob says confidently:

If your immune system is what it should be, your body can actually kill cancer cells. Right now locally grown food is my life savior. I have been at the farm; I have picked the beans. I have seen with my own eyes how the farmer grows my food. I thought I bought

local before because I bought at the [farmers'] market. But all that is sold there is not local. Now I know the difference.

To Bob, local food literally means a life saver.

Danielle, is a suburbanite in the youngest cohort. She has a family history of premature deaths and she thinks good food can help prolong life and increase health. She stresses her distrust of the mainstream food supply and her desires for “real” information about the source of her food. Making the effort to become a customer of local food gives Danielle a sense of control over her choices and destiny. Danielle’s answer to my question concerning what brought her to the local food market is:

An awareness of the growing danger of foods, the sense of control you can have over your foods, (through) getting to talk to local producers. I’d rather pay grocery bills than doctor bills. The best thing parents can do physically for their children is teach healthy food habits.

Danielle’s approach to local food is one of prevention and information gathering. She continues, “There is so much misinformation out there... It is hard to get good information.” The personal interaction with a knowledgeable grower helps her to find what she perceives as reliable information. It has been said that local food puts a face on the farmer. In Danielle’s case, the farmer puts a face on nutritional information, making the information real and trustworthy to her.

Transaction Superiority

The transactional relationship from Jeremy’s point of view is either based on trust or suspicion. He appreciates the difference he perceives in local food transaction compared to global food purchasing. He expresses this by saying, “I can look (the growers) in the eye or know where (to find them).” This type of personal contact fosters a sense of trust based on the belief that this level of accountability is a measure of the grower’s integrity. Therefore, local food suggests personal

accountability in the exchange experience as a counter scheme to the faceless mass-produced food system.

Valued Social Connections

Erik is now a suburbanite with agricultural roots from the middle cohort. Local food speaks to Erik of something he cannot quite express, saying only, "there is still this connection to the land." Erik continues and expands the idea of local food as a bridge to the farmer of the land, saying "For me, locally grown is reminiscent of growing up because I grew up among those people (referring to farmers), so I transfer some of my friends and neighbors into the faces of these people." Local food, for Erik, is anchored firmly in adult recollections of childhood experiences and relationships around the agricultural concept of land and grower and a community of familiar faces. In this way, local food evokes connections to particular places and people.

Examining the various features and functions, we quickly run into limitations since local food is rarely one thing but is shaped by a variety of motivations and situated in a context specific. Therefore, the philosophical dimensions of local food are also crucial in understanding the significance of local food as a cultural object.

Identity Formation

Fischler (1988) addresses the idea of food and identity through incorporation:

Incorporation is... the basis of collective identity and, by the same token, of otherness. Food and cuisine are quite central components of the sense of collective belonging'Food must not only be good to eat but good to think'. To identify a food, one has to 'think' it, to understand its place in the world and therefore understand the world....Each act of incorporation implies not only a risk but also a chance and a hope - of becoming more what one is, or what one would like to be....if one does not know what one is eating, one is liable to lose the awareness of certainty of what one is oneself (Fishler 1988:280,284,290).

Bob and Danielle purchase their food from the same farmer, and their stories are similar. Both have health concerns and both believe local food is a solution to their quest for health. So does their grower. Their farmer decides what to plant and how to grow it based on medical knowledge of the body and an understanding of the micro-nutrients in different foods and their effects on the body. Therefore, to Bob and Danielle, local food is access to food they know, by virtue of knowing the grower, and know about, having been taught by the grower. As Bob and Danielle, together with other customers, learn about nutrition from the grower, eat locally grown food, and develop a common language, they develop a common identity or culture. Their food becomes good to “think” and they become more of what they would “like to be” through the food they eat. Danielle says “you feel supported rather than being a weirdo” because the group develops common meanings and values. Through food, these bonds are strengthened and identity is confirmed.

When Jeremy talks about local food he stresses the entrepreneurial spirit that finds a venue of expression in the local food market. There is glitter in his eyes as he states: “I admire energetic entrepreneurs.... I do believe the American dream.... I admire it and have warm feelings for it. I left a fabulous career because I got caught up in it.” Jeremy, a marketer, tells how he made a movie for a client about local food and bought into it himself. He left his thriving marketing business, bought some land and moved to the country. He tells of the joy and challenge of making sausage from an old recipe. Local food, to Jeremy, is a representation of the freedom to choose one’s own destiny, a symbol of the American dream. He sees in local food the opportunity for adventurous people to succeed in business and for customers, the chance to choose how and by whom his or her food is grown. To Jeremy, local food is a biblical “David,” “the local, little guy,” in a “Goliath” world. Jeremy’s own endeavor did not succeed but it could be that purchasing locally grown food helps Jeremy to become more of what he wants to be through association.

As Peter and Ann, both urbanites and from the older cohort, speak about local food, they often veer into talk of local community, of people interacting with, learning from and supporting each other. Being a part of other cultures is important to Peter and Ann. It becomes evident that local food is a visible representation of these values and that in local food they see an avenue to strengthen community. They describe local food as “fresh and good tasting, helps support the people in the community.” As they continue to discuss their feelings and thoughts about local food it becomes evident that the two features are connected, as if the local food is good tasting precisely because it supports local people. If we follow Fischler’s argument, the good taste comes from understanding local food’s “place in the world” of supporting local people, from local food as building community being good to “think”, and from “becoming more of what one is or would like to be” from eating it. Peter and Ann say they like buying local food because it enables them to simultaneously eat good food and live out their values.

Food as Story: Values Formation Through Experiences

We have begun to see that food not only fills biological and nutritional needs, but cultural and symbolic needs (Fischler 1988) as well. In this section, I will more closely look at how local food nourishes and becomes symbols of meaning both individually and collectively (Fischler 1988) and how previous experiences in social settings emerge as stories that shape and maintain beliefs and values producing meaning.

Food as a storyteller and a carrier of culture is not foreign to these customers of local food. One customer’s mother used food to communicate the meaning of poverty to her family. She wanted to introduce her family to the people she had met in one of John Steinbeck’s novels. Annette, an urbanite from the older cohort, tells the story:

I remember also that my mother was very influenced by what she read. She got very involved in reading John Steinbeck’s novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. And one night, we came to the table. I was an

only child. And it was just the three of us, my father, my mother, and myself. We came to the table, and there really was nothing on the table. Usually, there might be a salad. And she came in with this bowl, plopped it down in the middle of the table and said it was soup. Very simply made soup. And she said, we are lucky to have this tonight. She had gotten so involved in this family that was in the story, that was starving, and she said that was our supper. I have never forgotten that!

Food is used in many ways to communicate, create, enhance, and promote culture and its values. In this section we will see how shared symbolic patterns of meaning emerge over time in rural as well as urban settings influenced by family and cohort patterns and further mitigated by elite opportunities, such as travel, education and fine dining experiences, and ecological concerns. These “patterns of meaning” (Griswold 1994) are passed on through the story of local food.

Direct and One Generation Removed Rural/Agricultural Experiences

The patterns of meaning of local food customers in this study are strikingly similar. However, the ways the meanings were formed diverge in customers with rural and urban backgrounds. The customers with rural backgrounds had, from an early age, experienced growing food either in their own parents’ garden or, more commonly, at a grandparent’s garden or farm. Katarina, one of the youngest interviewees and an urbanite with agricultural roots, says: “We always had tons of food, a lot of meat, because my grandfather had livestock, cows, and pigs. We ate very well.” As the customers explore their involvement with food and homegrown food in particular, their comments show that the high user value placed on local food in the form of “quality” and “nutritional superiority” represents shared experiences, values and beliefs, which constitutes culture.

Food has become something more than a commodity from the grocery store to Erik, who has lived on a farm, has had positive and privileged experiences of farm life and has personally experienced close friends losing their family farms. Erik is keenly aware that plants have to be harvested, and animals have to die for food to be

made. Erik says with conviction and understanding, rooted in personal emotional and intellectual experiences that, “it is ironic that life has to be given for life to live.” In addition, Erik is clearly conscious of the fact that food nourishes not only biologically and physically, but also socially, intellectually, and spiritually. He says concerning food:

We understood where it all comes from and there was a thankfulness. There is more to it than just bringing it home and putting it in the refrigerator; the whole process of enjoying a big meal, the big conversation, the preparation and the presentation. Thanks were always given for it.

When recalling family meal times, Erik remembers the gratitude for all it represented derived from his close connection to the land, the farmer and the cycle of life. To Erik, local food becomes symbolic of relationships and connections, and being part of an on-going family saga.

An urbanite from the middle cohort with agricultural childhood experiences, Lisa tells her story, which derives from little things like a ball of hand-churned butter, feeding the cats, working with Grandpa and the taste of sweet peas. To her, the story becomes a representation of a romanticized good life lived close to the source of the nourishment. Lisa explains:

What sparks the whole food thing for me is that we spent a lot of time at my grandparents’ farm in rural Iowa. That’s where I started realizing. Looking back, I remember grandmother churning butter. I remember having a ball of butter in her refrigerator and thinking the butter looked different. I remember my grandparents, and my uncles who farmed up there for many years, in fact, one of them still farms there. I remember him milking the cows daily and getting fresh milk from the cows. Of course, what was funny is, I didn’t like it; I didn’t like the taste of the fresh milk because it tasted kind of raw and weird, cause it wasn’t like what I got at home, and I think you like what you are used to. But I do remember going and watching them milk. What was neat was after they were done, they would pour a little milk in the dish for the barn cats. And then, the other thing was, my grandfather had a garden that was just his pride and joy. He was about 75 when I was born. I remember helping him plant his garden, you know, helping as a kid helps. I’m sure it was no help. But I remember it being a big deal. I have

incredibly fond memories of doing things, like sitting on the porch of my grandparents' house, shelling peas, cutting corn off of the cob, and hulling strawberries. All of the things you have to do with fresh food. And you know, as a kid, you complain. But I know that all of the food that my grandmother cooked was always fresh and right from the farm. Just little things, like I do remember that the peas tasted really sweet, and the new potatoes, totally different flavor than anything. Grandma would make like, creamed new potatoes and peas, and certain things she would make. I remember thinking, even as a kid, well, this is pretty special.

Lisa seemed forever affected by the nearness to both the food and her grandparents. All Lisa's natural senses were on high alert as were her emotional sensors, receiving messages of love, acceptance, belonging, and family identity. Thirty years later, she still can recall the details. I have been told that the reason for clinking glasses when drinking wine is to involve all the senses, in order to heighten the experience. Glasses were clinking all around Lisa on those long ago days, and those experiences have stayed with her. Hence, "local food" transmits all this to Lisa. Buying locally grown food validates Lisa's values and beliefs as it permits her actions to be located in the context of her experiences, re-enforcing and re-creating meaning.

Some people with direct agricultural experiences may hold different values regarding local food depending on other meanings. Lisa, for example, is quick to interject that her own mother does not share her excitement over local food. Lisa reflects how locally grown food symbolizes different things to different people, maybe based on different experiences, resulting in a values (what is considered of worth) and value (monetary expenditure) gap. Lisa says:

It would be interesting for you to talk to my mom about this, because she has none of the nostalgia that I have.... she grew up working on [the farm]. It always surprised me that they got rid of the fresh stuff and went for the convenience thing. It has always surprised me that they took that turn, cause like they could have it fresh, and then, I guess it was a matter of what was more feasible. Even today, I go to the Farmers' Market with my mom, and if she's like looking at green peppers, she'll say like, "Well, at Hy-Vee, they're 3 for a dollar, and here they're sixty cents each, and I'll say,

but mom, they're fresh and local, but she doesn't have that; she has more of the bargain hunter in her.

To Lisa, cherished rural childhood recollections of fresh food, honest work and relationship to land, produce and grower play an important role in her construct of meaning and purchasing local produce is a further extension of these meanings. In comparison, the cost of food is less relevant to her. But local food might symbolize other meanings to Lisa's mother, according to Lisa. For Lisa's mother, who grew up and daily (rain, hail or sun) had to do dirty and hard chores on her parents' farm, says Lisa, local food remains a staple that now wears a gourmet price tag.

The Story as Personal and In Transition

These differences informed by meanings are also seen among the customers of local food themselves. Mary is from the older cohort and a suburbanite with a rural childhood. Mary's relationship to food differs when compared with some of the younger and non-rural childhood customers in this study.

The younger customers, in this case also non-rural but with rural/agricultural childhood experiences, are more apt to be excited with local food because of the variety of produce, new recipes, combinations and ethnic spices. In contrast, Mary is looking for predictability, considers herself adventurous for trying squash and thinks of macaroni and cheese and pizza as "more of a variety." Mary tries to strike a balance between continuing the food traditions of her mother and adding a little something of her own:

Then with the children I cooked more of a variety of macaroni and cheese and pizza. I also carried through with the same vegetables as my mother. And I had to learn to like squash. I added eggplant, I think, during the time the children grew up.

Anna, a customer from the younger cohort with an urban background, enjoys pushing the food boundaries to the breaking point. She excitedly talks about what she calls her and her friends' experimental and daring approach to food:

The friends that I had were all interested, so we had lots of fun parties with all kinds of food, and we were always trying interesting things, new ideas, new flavors, you know, jalapeno ice cream, you know, hot and cold, just wanted to experience new things.

Mary's apparent value on predictability and wanting to carry on the food traditions of her mother, and this younger customer's desire for exciting food, flavor, texture and combinations, can both be satisfied by local food.

The story of local food changes constantly both on micro and macro levels. When people's personal lives and situations change, the significance of food also changes, as needs are reprioritized. When there are greater social changes, such as economic depression or wars or more women working outside the home or more single parents or growing distancing of food sources, food will be redefined in response or as an alternative to reflect these changes. Bob and Mary's story, through Mary's recollection, is a good example of these changes of emphasis and perceptual differences both culturally and personally.

As a child, Mary's exposure to what now is called local food was through her father and her mother. Mary's father was a butcher and was partly paid with fresh meat. Mary speaks warmly of going to the butcher shop and the treats they were offered there. Mary's mother grew, canned and cooked from their garden and baked bread every week. To Mary, her mother and father's care was expressed through their preparation of local food (then called: from the garden or from the butcher shop) communicating love and symbolizing consistency, reliability, safety, and provision. In Mary's early years as a wife and mother she too baked from scratch and cooked from her garden. However, as her children grew, Mary went to work and life became more hectic. Convenience and needing to spend less time in the kitchen became important and she turned to mixes and fast foods. Later, her husband Bob, was diagnosed with cancer. However, Mary and Bob lacked confidence that traditional medicine could help them. They chose to rely on the knowledge of a medical professional turned vegetable producer. The perceived medical benefits of fresh

organically grown food, Mary's childhood perception of local food as reliable and safe, combined with meanings of care and love, facilitated Mary and Bob's renewed interest in locally grown food. Arresting the cancer became their primary goal, and time saving and cost became unimportant.

As we look at Mary's relationship to food and how some of the other customers' relate to local food, we can see how the story or meaning of local food differs with experiences and has changed over time to the point that it has become a different cultural object, telling a different story. As Mary speaks of the changes that occurred during her life - of moving, going to school as an adult, living abroad, having children, and her husband's illness, she ends each recollection with "... and I continued cooking the same way as I always had done", stressing the permanence of her approach. To Mary, the values "reliability, safety, care and love" previously communicated by her parents, and later by herself to her own young children, through garden grown food remain the same even when she starts cooking what she refers to as "convenience food". That is because the values transmitted by "food from the garden" are not the same as what has become the values or meanings communicated by local food today. To Mary, the values are not inherent in "food from the garden" as much as they are communicated by the labor of Mary the mother and wife. The cultural object "local food" had not yet come to represent the shared significances it has communicated in more recent times. Since the meanings of cultural objects are conferred by the user, in Mary's world, she continued to transmit the same values to her family, first through home-grown food like her mother and later through convenience food. To the younger and middle cohort customers, "local food" communicates other stories, which cannot be communicated by convenience foods.

Different customers emphasize different aspects of local food: To Erik, it foremost speaks of personal connection to and identification with the grower; To Lisa, it is the nearness to food production and the sense of belonging; To Ann, it is in the same spirit as small mom and pop stores in the inner city; and to Jeremy, it is European

outdoor markets, different cultures and the entrepreneurial spirit. However, collectively most of the customers from the younger to middle cohorts would agree that local food represents superior quality, valued transactional social connections and socially and environmentally beneficial growing and marketing processes. These dimensions seem almost to convey a retreat back to simplicity. Eating local food internalizes these values and contributes to identity and culture formation in the eater(s) personally and collectively.

However, these meanings are not set, but growing and changing in the fertile soil of social interaction and experiences. Mary and Bob spend a lot of their time these days discussing local food with the members of their CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). Mary's meaning of local food might change a degree or two in the process, as will the other members' when significance is defined and redefined, just as in any other culture where a variety of stories all converge into "patterns of meaning...by which (community members) communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life" (Geertz, 1973:89).

Urban Influences and Experiences

Urban experiences are equally influential in producing local food customers for some of the same reasons as the rural experiences, but also for other less expected reasons. Several of the customers find the local farmers' market congruent with previous cosmopolitan experiences they have had, based on the small size of the businesses and the personal contact with the owner and grower.

From the older cohort, Ann expresses it this way:

The most urban experience I could find when I moved to Des Moines was the Downtown Farmers' Market. I grew up in, have always lived in, large urban cities, and in the downtowns of these large cities there are mom and pop stores. The Farmers' Market is the closest I can come in feel to those small urban stores.

Her husband Peter agrees and adds that an urban experience includes choices, and the local food market offers these extended choices. Peter explains:

I had lived in big cities before with 25,000 to 30,000 people. Grocery shopping was different there. There was Eddy's; a meat market, there was the Chickens and Eggs place that had no produce. Local people had a farm and a store. Sundays in the fall bushels of apples would be sold at corners. Generally, in urban situations you have many, many choices of things and I guess what I like about the market is that I find choices in the freshly grown.

For Jeremy, from the middle cohort, the local farmers' market reminds him of European urban markets. The entrepreneurial aspect of the market invigorates him mentally as it represents the innovative risk-taking spirit of human beings in many cultures. The availability of a wider selection of ethnic and unusual food stimulates him visually and physically and brings him back to the market, whether here in the U.S. or on a trip elsewhere in the world. Jeremy says, "I see the market, not as an agricultural experience, but I see it as an urban experience and as a European experience." Others also see going to the Des Moines' Farmers' Market as reminiscent of visiting European markets. Along with his appreciation for community, Peter also values other cultures. Whether travel sparked these interests in cultures or these interests fueled a desire to travel, is not clear. Peter notes that he is also influenced by his travels; through them, he has come to recognize the intimate relationship between food and culture. He says, "I've had the opportunity to travel throughout my life and food is very much part of culture, and I have always been very interested in cultures through the world." Peter goes on to explain that the local food experience provides the variety, choice and, especially, the interaction with other cultures that he values. He speaks at length about how food is able to convey culture and reach across language barriers. Peter says:

Ann and I have learned from all different racial and language groups, we have people from Africa live with us, and we learn how to prepare their food and share it, and Ann learns from them...do you know that we have friends from Ethiopia. Food is a way of sharing. A meal is a practical excuse to get together and share ideas. I like that we share ideas and cultures that helps us all be a little bit more interesting. It helps our quality of life.

From the middle cohort, Lisa relates travel to local food as well. Her attachment to local food started with her rural experiences at her grandparents, but was further developed and maintained through her European urban travel experiences. As her food experiences accumulated, she found more and more congruency between her emerging food values and those of the local food market. Lisa explains:

In Europe I think there is just so much more respect for food and what people do in a restaurant. The biggest thing that brought it home for me [was this]; I was in France, and my husband and I wanted to go to this restaurant. We were early. We were too early. We walked in, and the whole staff was sitting there, having a big meal together, and they said they weren't open yet, to come back in an hour. They were sitting at a table with linens and nice [unclear]. It was just very beautiful, and I compared it to the way we were treated [when I worked] at the [Des Moines] Country Club. We'd get like a break in a room out of cinder block, next to a time clock, and I just felt, you know, the joy of eating was just not here like it was in Europe.

I do remember using the words fresh there, like when we bit into the bread, I remember how fresh it was, and comparing it to the stale stuff here, like dry bagels. Like in Europe, you get a beautiful slice of bread and butter and jam. It sounds simple, but it was so fresh and vivid and wonderful, versus what you get here, like a bagel that tastes a little frozen and dry, like it's no big deal. I remember that, the contrast. Just the whole joy of eating in Europe. I just remember how much fun it was.

Lisa finds values in the European food culture that are attractive to her: "more respect for food and what people do in restaurants," "table with linens (for the servers)," "the joy of eating," "freshness of food," "simple, fresh, vivid and wonderful" and she remembers "how much fun it was." When Lisa and the other customers speak of local food and the farmers' markets here in the U.S., they often use the same language of respect, atmosphere, freshness, simplicity, vividness and wonder, indicating that they find the same qualities and fun experiences here as they have been so attracted to both in Europe and at their grandparents' table. Local food, then, is an opportunity to recreate pleasant past experiences in a present local setting.

As an older urbanite, Kurt speaks about going as a child with his mother to the old city market in downtown Des Moines. He says that he gets the same “feeling” when he goes to the farmers’ market now. After a pause, he admits that he never thought about it before, but he has that same “feeling” now when he visits European open-air markets. These “feelings” are not connected to the location of the market, but rather to the experience of and values associated with the open-air market. This suggests that local food can be a portable culture, an idea that I will take up later.

Elite Connotations

The customers of local food in this study are often influenced to view local food in a particular way due to an element of elitism further reinforced by local food being featured at up-scale restaurants, promoted by higher education and reminiscent of European dining experiences. If the customers of local food in this study had been recent immigrants from Bosnia, from the Latino population or another group, the meaning of local food might be different still. However, the customers in this study were all from, if not affluent, at least above average income families as evidenced by their stories of upscale dining, travel and higher learning opportunities.

The younger professional customers refer to local food as a “status thing” and confess, “I am a food snob,” as they confide that the trip to the farm to acquire the food impressed their friends. A suburbanite from the middle cohort with agricultural roots, Erik takes a long look at his motives concerning buying direct from the farmer:

I don’t know if I can put my finger on what it is. It is just more enjoyable than taking sustenance. Having a peanut-butter sandwich or whatever, that can be great. But... it is probably showing off to some extent to somebody else, saying we really worked hard to get this. I mean we had to run all over to get these special ingredients. Or aren’t you impressed that I know a local farmer well enough to go over to his house and pick up this little crown roast? Perhaps, but it is enjoyable to see someone be that impressed with what you put together because it is obviously special.

To Erik, family interactions through fine dining experiences define and set his own family apart from others, making him feel select and, it seems, a little “better” than his friends. Erik explains:

I say we are both (my wife and I) lucky enough to have affluent enough upbringings that going out for dinner on special occasions was part of our lives. Even though we were a big family, we often went out for brunch after church or family dinners in restaurants. That kind of thing taught you to sit up and eat well in public. And we were fairly exposed to that and in her family [referring to his wife] they went out often enough that I think we appreciated going out for what was considered a fine meal. And it was also a point of pride that not all of our friends' parents believed in taking their kids out.

An urbanite from the younger cohort, Anna talks about the effects of an educational experience that increased her exposure to “wonderful food,” and at the same time taught her what foods were suitable for “high profile guests.” She learned that local horseradish can be one of those foods. Anna explains:

I was very interested in food and taking food classes. It was in a private Catholic school, so I worked for the president of the school, and she was a nun... She would entertain high profile guests in her home, for the college, and she would make wonderful foods, and I would help serve and clean up, sometimes help prepare. That was really neat because I would take samples of that food back to my dorm, and we would have some fun little tasting parties. I learned a lot from her. I didn't even understand what a horseradish was, and she brought it out from her garden and would chop it up, and that was a good experience.

For Anna, her education, fine dining and work experiences broadened her food views, not to far away exotic produce, but to appreciate the “exoticness” of local food. For her, it was something mundane becoming something novel, and the thrill of finding a buried treasure in her own backyard.

To these customers, elite opportunities offered exposure to local food and increased their appreciation of it. They might even use local food to show off to their friends. But to say that status is the sole motivator for purchasing locally grown food is reductionism, since the motives of these customers are also embedded in several

other strong values concerning family, traditions, community, quality of food, the livelihood of the grower, and ecological concerns.

Ecological Concerns

Not all experiences have a cumulative effect, and not all customers of local food have fond childhood memories of closeness to the land and grower. Some of the educational experiences are in direct opposition to family values, and then the customer has to wrestle with what values to keep. An urbanite from the younger cohort with agricultural roots, Gretchen comes to local food motivated by a combination of interests, desires and values. Unlike the other customers, there were not many local food precursors in Gretchen's family background. Family experiences seldom included exciting foods. Socially nurturing food experiences took a low priority compared to other values in her family. Gretchen was not socialized into great food; rather, she reached for it due to its absence in her childhood. Gretchen partly found her way to the local food market through an interest in her own ethnic heritage. She is Asian by birth and was adopted by a European-American farm family. She was also drawn to local food by her interest in a vegetarian life-style, a desire for culinary excitement and strong values concerning the destructive ecological effects of her family's industrial agriculture. Gretchen tells her story:

My attitudes don't come from rebellion; they derive from an impatience for certain inconsistencies. Our school had weather patterns and ecology in second grade and marketing tactics in seventh grade. Put them together and you have a modern farmer's nightmare idea of a daughter. What do you say when your youngest asks what happens to the oil that soaks into the ground under an ailing tractor? Or what happens if you can't explain how plants metabolize (or can't metabolize) the toxins in 2-4D?

Ecological concerns are important to Gretchen, but they are not the only motivation behind her commitment to local food. The idea of a culture of local food as socially shared meanings concerning life, seems to more comprehensibly describe Gretchen's motivations for preferring local food. The social involvement with

likeminded people assists Gretchen in creating an identity as an aficionado of fine foods and wines while acting on social and environmental values.

In the first section we examined local food as a “cultural object” (Griswold 1994) and learned that local food is the carrier of certain meanings. In the second section we listened to the stories local food tells in congruence with customers’ previous experiences and current values and beliefs. We found some differences, but more importantly, we found the beginnings of “overall patterns of meaning” (Geertz, 1973:89) built on “shared significance” (Griswold 1994). If we apply Geertz’ definition of culture to the meanings of local food customers, these overall customer patterns converge into a “culture of local food”. As with the other customers, Gretchen’s interests, beliefs and values found a “home” in this “culture of local food.” I will spend the rest of this chapter examining what this culture looks like to its customers.

Culture of Local Food – Patterns of Meanings

These customers perceive and relate to the local food system differently than to the larger more global food system. They participate in both, but have emotional attachments much more to the one. The main difference in perception seems to be the significance of shared patterns of meaning based on values and beliefs, not unlike a social covenant, existent in the one and absent in the other. Another difference is the emphasis on “connectedness” to land, grower, and family (past, present and future) in the local food system. These patterns converge into a culture of local food.

Social Covenant - Working For the Common Good

Local food involves bridging roles (customer to grower) and generations (the older to the younger). It also involves personal relationships, reciprocity and trust, as we have previously seen. The “culture of local food,” as experienced and practiced by these customers, can be described by the concept of a social covenant. According to Sacks (1996), the notion of a social covenant comes from the Jewish tradition. Maimonides describes humans as social beings who do not do very well on their

own, but find it equally hard to be together. The social covenant is a moral commitment between people to work for the common good. It is an attempt to allow for constructive interaction and to bridge the difficulties associated with this need for interaction, while creating institutions of civil society such as families, communities, voluntary associations and moral traditions (Sacks 1996). This covenant relationship is evident in the stories shared by the customers of local food. It is at the heart of “the culture of local food” as the interactions are based on shared significances, values, and beliefs exercised in an atmosphere of trust, rather than the economic priorities of the corporate and global food distribution scheme. This is not to say that local producers are not business people who also are interested in an economic return. They are very much interested in making a living in order to retain their farms and their way of life as they provide food for customers.

Danielle’s description of what local food means to her illustrates this notion of a social covenant built on trust and shared significances:

It [local food] means being able to go to a Farmers’ Market and trust that the products I am buying there are produced by local farmers. We’re aware of vendors that we trust down there. I think people have become more aware of say, pesticides in foods, and problems with foods, and maybe trust local foods more. I was impressed with how much they knew, you know, plant this next to this to help get rid of these bugs, and their spinach. There wasn’t a drop of dirt on it. I just trusted them so much because of all of their knowledge and their experience and commitment that they have to their community. So not only was it a source of food for our family, it was a source of information, medical information, a community of people who cared about the same things I did.

“Caring about the same thing” is an important concept in a social covenant. The significance of the relationship, to Gretchen, is that an association built on common values can be trusted more than a purely monetary transactional association:

I think it is extremely [more] important to develop a relationship with the owners than it is to necessarily get the best price every time.

Anna's perception of the relationship even goes past trust to love. She says of the growers:

It is a labor of love, otherwise, it's not like you are going to get rich selling lettuce at the farmer's market.

Erik all but says that it is his deep care and commitment for the farmer that motivates him to support these efforts. He values local community, but he is more cognizant of the individual farmer and his/her livelihood. Erik makes supporting that farmer or farmers a priority, enabling him, through his food purchases, to live out these values, one farmer at a time. Erik explains:

Some of my friends are still out there farming and others have had to quit because it is not feasible anymore, and I know the pain that has brought them because they really enjoy the close connection to land and life style... When I think of farmers in general and hear about their plights, I put the faces that I know to'em, and so I guess it just seems like it is a natural connection. I guess I don't understand people that don't have that connection.

Annette and Anna also express their desire to support local growers. Annette is determined to let her beliefs govern her purchases: "I go to buy from the people who are trying to have an income from the things that they themselves raised." Intermingled with Anna's great respect, gratefulness and admiration, there is a desire to reciprocate and be part of this culture of local food:

I think I appreciate most that the people are so dedicated to be there. I want to buy. I know that I am spending a lot more money at the farmer's market than if I were to go to the grocery store and just buy some iceberg lettuce. But, the fact is, they are out there doing this, and I want to support them.

"Culture of local food," serves to build community and provide the members an identity. Katarina understands the role of local food as a carrier of that distinctiveness or culture (as collective identity). She says:

Your food becomes who you are. That's why I think that farming is the most noble profession because [they] are producing the food.

A food system centered on food as a basis for empowerment of civil society, supported and anchored in shared significances and based on trust, "labor of love",

concern for others, and reciprocity is very attractive to these customers of local food. By nurturing this social covenant for the common good, local food customers and local growers build community through the innovative networks they create.

Connectedness Through Shared Values

If the social covenant is the heart of the “culture of local food” to these customers, relationships based on similar values are the blood flow that keeps the culture alive. Customers find satisfaction in the connections facilitated by local food between growers and eaters, past, present and future generations, as well as other cultures, neighbors and friends. Erik says, “What makes it (local food) work is the quality, but also the connectedness.” Connectedness refers not only to land and grower, but the values exhibited by the grower and, therefore, connected to that product. They are searching for congruency between their own convictions and those of the grower. Gretchen says:

I prefer to buy from the people who have the same ideas that I do. [My grower] is very much into it. You ask him why he is doing what he is doing, and his eyes glaze over, and he really gets into it. (She goes on to tell her ritual picking who to buy from) I’ll go out there and see what they have first, and if I like what they have, I’ll get to know them, and if I get to know them, it works out okay.

In the global food system there are no opportunities, or even desire, to get to know the producers (“UK public blows relationship marketing out of the water” 2000) most plausibly because the customers’ and producers’ values systems are different. Because of this discrepancy in values, Danielle and others are less trusting concerning the safety of mainstream food and the ethics of those who handle it. As another customer expresses, “my awareness has changed, (now it involves) food safety issues and trust....” Since the local food culture is built on relationships through commonly held patterns of meaning, it is more located in philosophy than physical location or even physical features associated with quality.

The notion of “quality,” here lies in the relationship to the grower. Lisa says, “We want to know the people we are buying from; we want to know that they cared about it.” When Lisa talks about “caring,” she means a deep sense of caring as a mother would show for her children’s welfare as she prepares their food. This caring becomes part of the quality of the food. Caring about the food in this sense is a concept unique to the “culture of local food”. When customers are talking about the “quality of the food,” they are referring to the philosophy of the growers in the “culture of local food,” as well as the physical quality of the product. After telling wonderful stories of local food experiences, admiration of the growers and appreciation of the quality, Jeremy says smiling, “[That] local is better is an assumption probably more philosophical based than fact based.”

If quality only refers to the physical features of food, most grocery stores could oblige, with maybe the exception of tomatoes and corn in season. If “quality” means free of hormones, chemicals and genetic manipulation, some grocery stores can meet this concern by offering locally grown and organic produce. However, the human face-to-face interaction with the grower is next to impossible for most stores to provide. As Chad reflects on the importance of knowing the grower, it becomes apparent that the personal connection is of even more importance, to some customers, than the concept of local, and that there is something unique about this relationship at the farmers’ market. I would argue that the unique thing is the “shared significances” that override even the notion of physical locality.

Connectedness Between Customer And Grower

The customers speak of being connected foremost to the farmer, the origin of their food and their own past and future through local food. The continuity both in relationship and in time experienced through buying local is of great importance to the customer. The customers speak about the intimacy of their relationship with the grower providing an honest connection to the genesis of their food. In Erik’s words:

The nice thing is you kinda know they [the farmers] are out there and you can give them a call and see if you can come out. They are

always working so hard. It is good for the kids to see the connection.

Chad agrees, confirming the sense of belonging that can come with knowing someone's life. In an increasingly mobile society, the customers of local food in this study turn to the local food system as a source of community offering an interpersonal horizontal association (Putnam 2000). As in a community, connectedness leads to some important assumptions concerning trust. The customers trust "their" growers as you would trust a neighbor you have known for years. The trust goes even to the point that if the grower uses chemicals, the customer believes that they cannot be bad chemicals because "his" grower is a good guy. Chad says:

[I trust him] because everything is clean, ready to go, and he stands behind everything, and he has good quality stuff. I don't think he uses chemicals. He uses some.. not a whole lot. He is honest. He is good.

Although the customers are certain this relationship with the grower is special, they have a hard time putting their finger on what it is that is special. It is almost as if the grower takes on celebrity status, as Erik says:

I don't know if I can put my finger on what it is. But... it is probably showing off to some extent to somebody else, saying... aren't you impressed that I know a local farmer well enough to go over to his house and pick up this little crown roast.

Kurt has the same idea and finds it equally hard to explain:

In many cases [buying local produce at farmers' markets] you are dealing with the person who went out in the field and picked it that day, and there is something about that interaction that is appealing. I don't have any idea what that is, but there is some kind of communication there.

The customers, most likely, are referring to local food conveying its "story" of shared meanings and the origin of food. There is magic in stories. The story creates a social space for the local food customer to relate more candidly with the true nature of food and "it makes the experience of food more enjoyable, more romantic and the steak

tastes better”, says Erik. It is, as one of the customers expressed: “the drama and romance that are denied the eater of food without realized connections”.

The romance of local food is a re-occurring theme during the interviews. Erik believes customers that are not eating locally grown food are denied some sort of romance; Lisa speaks of her romanticized ideas surrounding her grandparents’ agricultural life; and Jeremy even left his marketing career for eight years due to his romance with local food. When I asked him why he became a small grower for a while, he explains:

Ahum, romantic idealism. Actually I had written a short movie for a client about agriculture and it was called *Whatever It Takes* and it was very much romanticizing the attitude of the farmer doing whatever it takes to do the right thing and all that kind of stuff and I bought the story apparently and in the middle of my career, I was 35 and on a fairly fast track, and I left the business for eight years and I farmed and our kids were 13, 10 and 6 at the time when we moved from St. Louis, an area of 2½ -3 million people, to a farm outside of a Midwest city. Our youngest boy came home early on the second or third day after going to school. We had moved from a 3 million metro area [to a] small farm seven miles from a 1,500 person town and he asked; Am I a town kid or a country-kid, this was an important differentiation to him (laughter).

Now, Jeremy has sold the farm, is back into marketing and may vicariously live out his romanticized notions of agricultural life through purchasing local food.

Connectedness To Family And Friends

The stories inherent in local food serve different purposes. They confirm family membership and create boundaries; they create a space for connection to the origin of the food; they add value by making the food taste better; they convey a romantic notion of life; and they are also used for impression management of the social self.

Food, especially food obtained by a sacrifice of some kind, someone’s own hard work, expenditure, or expended effort, is seen as showing love and making and/or deepening social connections. Local food fills the requirement of making something

special for at least three reasons: often, it takes effort to find local produce; sometimes it requires a financial sacrifice; and along with the food there is a story to tell. Erik explains that his first contact with local lamb grew out of a desire to create something special. Erik ended up feeling satisfied about the effort he made, pleased with the sacrifice and the good story he served with the meal:

Part of our connection with Cory's [the lamb farmer] was that a special dinner was around the corner so we thought lamb would be outstanding. We enjoy it and we rarely get to get it. The grocery store does not carry it much. That event and that evening was special enough and people enjoyed it so much we got to tell them where we picked this up, so there was a story behind the big preparation of the meal. We enjoyed it enough and it came up later on after the fact; have you ever gone back to the farmers' market and gotten lamb from those people?

Then we have had other times when we have made a trip out to the farm. It is part of the specialness since it was a special trip to the farmers' market or out to the farm or them dropping it off at our house since it was a last minute request. It kind of adds uniqueness to the meal like a special kind of vine; this did not come from the butcher; this came from the farm, and this is what these people do.

Katarina has the same notion:

Last night, he (her boyfriend) had his friend over and I made chicken dinner with gravy and everything else...I buy from the farmer, free range chicken and high quality eggs and I take a lot of pride in my cooking... I still see that as an expression of concern.

Connectedness through food looks different to different generations. Customers in their 40s and 50s especially, but also those in their 20s and 30s, strive to create memorable experiences connecting and confirming family and love. Lisa, in her 40s, reflects on the differences between generations:

Honest to God, I don't think my mother sat there and said, 'well tonight we are going to have a quality time together.' A quality meal just came naturally. I don't think my grandmother said, 'well, I am going to bake a pie because this will be sharing a part of myself with my grandchildren; this will be my heritage passed down to them.' [Today] you go to people's houses and they have pictures of their kids in an apple orchard playing with the apples. And I think they were thinking, 'we were so busy during the week, we're going

to go out and have a quality moment at the apple orchard.' I guess that is very cynical, but I think people are very into trying to create these moments and food will become part of that. We're now cognizant of these [quality moments] happenings.

Anna, from the younger cohort, says her generation also is into "Quality moments...and although that kind of cooking takes planning...people are very keyed into creating these moments...."

Erik, from the middle cohort, speaks of his attempts at creating quality memories for his child. As Erik wants to send his stories of family experiences into the future he expressed his concern that his child would remember. Erik draws and tells with excitement about his creation, "The Valentine Lobster Race":

One year Valentines day came up and it was too much work to get a sitter, so we went to the store and got a couple of lobsters. We raced them across the floor. He [Erik's son] was two years old. He was old enough to remember so [next year] he asked: Are we going to have lobster races? So now we have a family Valentines Day. He has grown to like lobsters so now we need at least three lobsters. So we are going to need to get bigger pots. So we prepare a big deal on Valentines Day and it has turned into a big family event. I don't know if he will remember that when he is four years old.

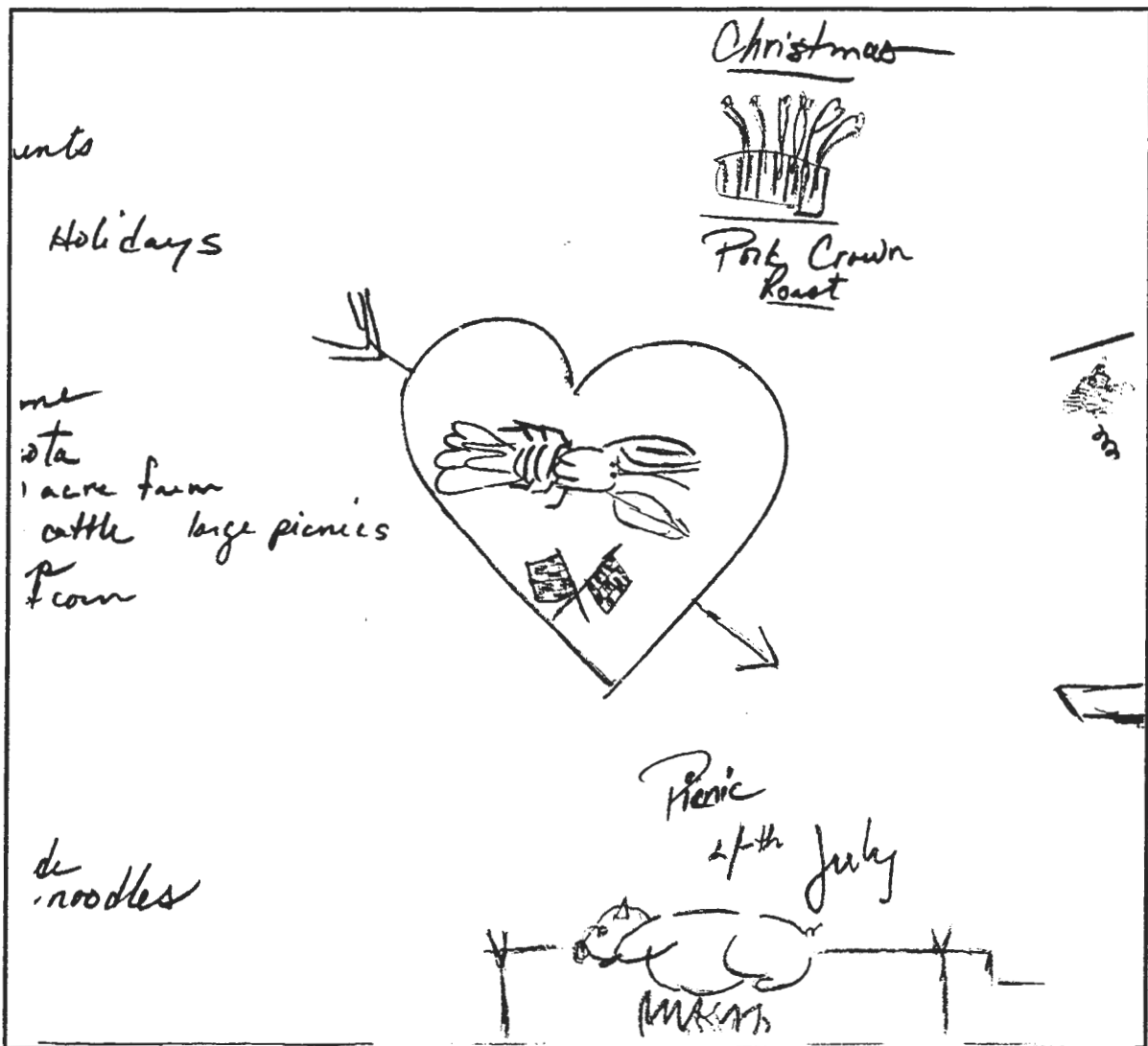


Figure 3. Erik's Drawing of Family Traditions Becoming Food Memories

When Erik, with great care, draws his own tradition invention - the lobster feast - he draws it almost in the same time line space as he draws the Christmas pork crown roast and the two day 4th of July hog roast event instituted a generation ago by his relatives in the neighborhood where Erik grew up. These traditions, two coming from the past and one attempting to reach the future converge in Erik's food experiences and become part of his family's cultural identity. Erik speaks at length about the hog roast and how those younger than him now stay up all night after the roast, like he used to do, while he and his wife go to bed earlier, because they now have children

of their own. As Erik draws his food history, the Valentine Lobster picture hesitantly seems to make its way into the middle of the other two family events, as if Erik is hoping for it to establish a permanent space there for generations to come. Erik takes comfort in the continuity of the past, present and future which anchors his life to meanings beyond the moment. It is these meanings, which give Erik's life purpose, and create and confirm individual and collective identity.

Culture of Local Food and Portability

Another interesting feature of local food is that it is not really fixed in place as we normally think of local. Local food, as a culture of shared significances, is a rather portable culture.

In a society that is increasingly mobile and urban, the loss of community and local culture is often bemoaned. Customers of local food indicate that their concept of "local food" is both site and values specific, meaning that its proximity is relative to the current location of the customer at the moment, as long as the values perceived to be part of local are present. The portability of local food as a values system is demonstrated by the ease with which the customers move between European, Asian or American local food experiences. Kami tells of being invited to spend a weekend with the family of the goat cheese maker whom she had met at a local market in France. In the next sentence, she speaks of the local foods market here in Iowa, as if those different markets are one and the same:

"Truly had no electricity. I got to milk the goats. They were grazing in the pasture. Had to bring them in. The chickens were running around. They grabbed one, broke its neck and that was dinner. Eight years later Erik and I went back... The cheese guy is still there." I ask Kami: "So it was the European market that made you start going to farmers' markets?" Kami quickly answers, "Yeah, I think I first started going because of the young girl selling sweet corn up the road."

Fischler (1988:281) argues that "absorption of a food incorporates the eater into a culinary system and, therefore, into the group that practices it." This seems to hold

true for customers of local food. One of the vendors remarked in an earlier study (Solan 1999), that he met his customers at various functions, restaurants and concerts. This was an indication to him that there is a common bond of interests and/or values between the grower and his customers. These common bonds are communicated by food through what Fischler calls incorporation. Fischler argues that "the food that one absorbs is, universally it seems, supposed to act either on the state of the organism or its very nature" (1988:279). Fischler goes on to state:

Incorporation is the basis of collective identity and, by the same token, of otherness. Food and cuisine are a quite central component of the sense of belonging. In some situations of migration or of minority cultures, it has been observed that certain features of cuisine are sometimes retained even when the original language of the culture has been forgotten....Human beings mark their membership of a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what it eats or is imagined to eat....But this is not all: any culinary system is attached to, or part of, a world view, a cosmology (1988:280-281).

Peter's recollection of Christmas dinner seems to support Fischler's claims. Peter draws his childhood Christmas dinner table on the sketchpad with a rather large empty spot in the middle. I question him why there are no people sitting there. He answers matter-of-factly that on one end of the table sit the Germans, then there is a three foot space in the middle and on the other end sit the Norwegians with their "Lutfisk."³ The only food that made it across the divide was "lefsa"⁴ (See Figure 5).

³ Dried cod fish, softened by soaking

⁴ Thin soft white bread made partially from mashed potatoes

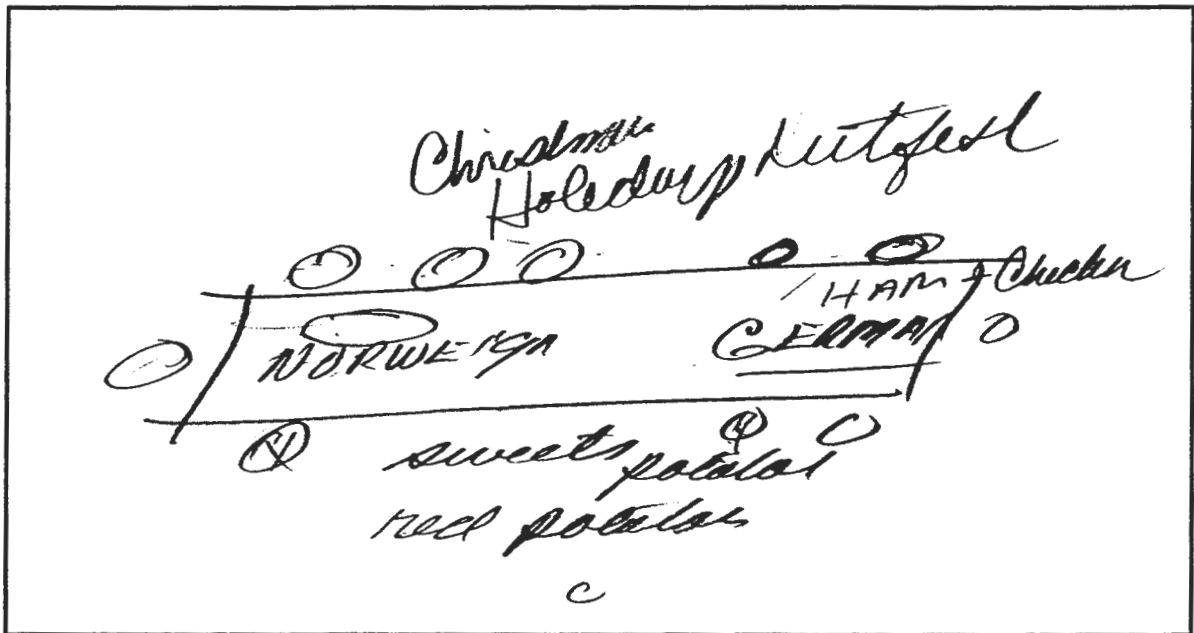


Figure 4. A Detail from Peter's Drawing of Christmas Dinner: Two Food Cultures Side by Side - But Not Merging

Membership in a culture is an important social concept, and customers of local food seem to have developed such a culture based on common meanings and significances. Even if the customer happens to be at a market in a foreign land, (s)he feels at home. Kurt says that he likes the markets in Europe because “they have a homey feel to them.”

This “culture of local food” could be described as a “brand community”. A brand community is:

a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand.... They exhibit shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001:1).

Danielle says about her relationship to her CSA grower and other members:

Not only is it a source of food for our family, it is a source of information, medical information, a community of people who care about the same thing I do. Like they have Sunday night, some sort of menu, you could stop by and try it. Or they would have a discussion about something, and whether the discussion went

anywhere or not, you were still there with other people with similar values.

There are some important differences, though, between the notion of global “Brand Community” and the concept of “Culture of Local Food.” A brand community exhibits “shared consciousness” while culture suggests values and shared meanings that might have been passed down from a previous generation and are hoped to be passed on to yet another generation. Culture has been defined as the “expressive aspect of human existence” (Griswold 1994:4), while community might suggest more of the relational aspect. In culture of local food, familiarity with the brand name and advertised values of product is replaced with familiarity with the producer and a shared values system that encompasses both producer and customer. Gretchen confirms the importance of the beliefs of the producer. She says: “I want to deal with someone that believes like I do,” in addition to eating what others with similar beliefs eat. The importance placed on shared beliefs makes local food more of a “culture” rather than a “community.” Culture is the notion of shared significances and meanings (Griswold 1994; Geertz, 1973) and, in the case of local food, shared values as well. A community could be based on factors such as shared physical space or shared experiences, which could hold a variety of meanings for its membership.

Culture of Local Food and Shifting Meanings

The customers wrestled with the concept of change in availability and attitudes towards locally grown food both as a cultural and personal phenomenon. Erik says,

I think, during the 60’s and 70’s, everybody thought bigger was better and processed and sterilized and neutralized was as good as it gets. TV dinners were a great thing, and people have come back around now to know that it is better to have it a little closer to the source.

Jeremy, when asked if he thinks availability of “local food” has increased or decreased, answer with a common but perplexing statement:

No question that it (access to locally grown food) has increased. It was all locally grown the first part of my life.

How do customers claim availability of local produce has increased, while in the same sentence declare that it was all previously locally grown? Here again, I would argue, is an example of the emergence of a new “culture.” The perception “local food” has metamorphosed to include values, beliefs and shared significances that were not earlier defined. In other words, “local food” has become a discrete, knowable cultural object. Earlier, local food did not need to be defined since “all was local” then. In the customers’ childhood local food was just part of life maybe mundane, almost invisible and taken for granted. Lisa’s comment about her mother having “none of the nostalgia I have” seems to support such a change in perception. Kurt laughingly adds his reflections saying:

And I really get a big bang out of what they call free range chickens now. When I was a kid, you bought one cow, and fed the cow. Two hogs followed the cow, and then ten chickens ---that was free range!!! (Laughter) Now, it is the in thing, huh?? We used to think chickens were such filthy animals.

When Jeremy comments, “When I was a child we did not know about ‘free range chicken’, it was just ‘Those damn chickens in the trees’” it tells us something. “Those damn chickens in the trees” reveals a realistic understanding about the hard work of farming. “Free range chickens,” however, involves a whole set of more recent values like humane treatment of animals, health, ecology and sustainability to name a few. As customers’ awareness of these issues has increased, so demand for this “new” product has also increased, along with demand for more visible market places that offer these “values-added” products. Customers now have a choice not only in products, but also in culture.

For each customer, this personal meaning of food has also changed through their life cycle. Gretchen puts it rather succinctly:

My childhood years centered around comfort foods...
The adolescent years centered around convenience

Her adult years are best described in terms of a culture of local food. Anna uses her drawing in combination with her words to tell the story of personal change of meaning and relationship to food. She starts, like Gretchen, with comfort foods, a small cup of lemonade when sick in bed as a child. As her food experiences grow so does her drawing. Her hand swiftly draws huge houses in cosmopolitan cities while discussing with great fervor ethnic and European cuisine with its many textures, flavors and colors (See part of her drawing in Figure 6).



Figure 5. Part of Anna's Drawing of Her Food Experiences and Their Context

The place of sharing food has changed for some in that they eat out more and the actors have changed. Earlier, grandparents grew the food now grown by local producers. However, the meaning of local food consumption seems not to have changed in kind. This meaning involves community, reciprocity, identity, trust, shared beliefs and values, quality as connectedness between customer and eater, and specialness of sharing a meal together built on these meanings. These shared significances are closely guarded and expanded upon especially by younger and

middle cohort customers in this study who want to create food memories for their own children and establish continuity with previous generations and into the future. In lieu of grandparent-farmers, local growers become symbolic grandparent-food providers from which parents' childhood memories are passed on to their own children.

Culture of Local Food in Everyday Life

The customers of local food, in this study, are predominantly “feeders” meaning they perceive food-related processes as spaces for social interaction (in contrast to “fuelers” whose interest in food is limited to keeping their “engines” running, in order to get to the next place). The customers express in different ways their need for food to be attractive both in taste and presentation, and their view that local food satisfies these needs better than store bought products. They also express how local food offers them a creative expression through the everyday ritual of preparing food and eating. Katarina explains,

I experimented more on my own, made up my own sauces. I really got into presentation and grew confident about it. Now I see it as a creative experience. Cause all day, I'm using my head, and it feels good to come home, and I am making this stuff outside of my head and it is so much fun to share.

Anna, after reflecting on the visual attraction of the local food market, reflects on her relationship to food and art,

I think that I became a lot more visual because of the photography classes that I was taking. When I started to do recipe development and food styling and working with food, I started to understand, that to me, it is almost like an art form. It is my form of art, so I wanted everything to be multi-textured, dimensional, and have lots of color and more than one flavor and crunch and cold or hot. All of these different elements work together to make food more exciting, and it also had to look good. No matter what I was making, when I put a plate of food out, I wanted it to be visually exciting, so I started to cook.

Anna approaches local food with the same excitement and finds congruencies between her art and local food which inspires her. She says about farmers' markets:

When I went, it was such a novel idea to be outside buying your food. Even in the winter, this one, it was kind of an outdoor/indoor market, and it was still around, even in the off times, and I was really interested buying the freshest, most unique produce that I could find. I wanted it to really look good, and I was tired of iceberg lettuce, green peppers, and all of the basic stuff. Then when I went to France for cooking school, there were wonderful markets everywhere, and that was more inspiring.

Gretchen stated that there are new restaurants coming into the city featuring local food “with local fresh mantras.” Food that delivers not only nutrition, but ideas, values, esthetics and spirituality is doing very much the same thing as the creative arts; it gives beyond the actor on the stage, the paint on the paper and the food grown in Iowa, it becomes something bigger than itself. So it is with local food. Through the connections it facilitates and the social covenant it inspires, it becomes more than just good quality food.

The cultural object “local food” with its various dimensions, shaped and maintained by the customers’ personal experiences and values, and the local food system with its perceived features and functions, creates a congruent environment where the “Culture of Local Food” can thrive. As these congruencies increase, so do the customers’ expressed desires and actual behaviors involving local food. For several of the customers, this “Culture of Local Food” has become their primary occupation. Six of the twelve interviewees are working full-time in areas of food and concentrate some of their efforts specifically on local food. Their occupations include food stylist, food writer, food marketers and food sales. One could argue that working in the food industry, these customers need to be knowledgeable about local food. However, as we have seen through this life history study, their interest and values surrounding local food have grown over the years, both in scope and intensity through their experiences and social interactions *preceding and culminating* in work related to local food production. The customers of local food have become more or less established in the “Culture of Local Food” as a way to express their “attitudes towards life” (Griswold 1994).

Summary and Conclusion

When her interview came to a close and I asked Annette if she had anything to add, she smiled and said:

Going to a food store is a perfectly impersonal experience, the canned goods don't talk to me or smile at me...of course, I don't smile at them either, so...But going to the farmers' market, I feel like I am having and looking forward to having a personal and happy experience. Much different!

The difference comes from the culture of local food. Local food as a symbolic cultural object conveys trust and builds relationships as a high quality product (and all that entails) through its unique customer-grower business interaction. Local food in combination with customers' previous experiences, values and beliefs tells the stories that "develop their knowledge about and attitude towards life" (Geertz, 1973:89). The association between customers and local food, in this study, emerges as an intricate mosaic of congruencies between the actors' own socially and experientially derived beliefs and values and those beliefs and values they find in the local food system. A "culture of local food" is expressed, reinforced, and reinvented as customers involve themselves with the growers, other customers, and their own families and friends. In so doing, they experience and are part of something that stirs the essence of who they are and what they believe. This, for them, verifies meaning of and creates happiness with life.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This concluding chapter first explores some implications and extensions of the findings regarding a culture of local food. I discuss the risk of commodifying local food, the potential tension between “global” and “local”, the relative absence of social justice consensus, the nature of customer commitment, how power might be reclaimed and some issues on identity formation. I conclude by noting limitations of the study and some avenues for future research.

The Importance of a Culture of Local Food

This research indicates that local food is at least partially motivated by moral convictions concerning the environment, safe and secure food sources and a living wage for local growers as a reaction and/or alternative to global food (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000). However, the motivations are not as purely conceived as that. Instead, they suggest a more complex weave of motivations developed over time through experiences and social interactions, emerging as a culture of local food. The uniqueness of local food, according to these customers’ life history interviews, lies not in the fact that the food is local per se, but in the multi-dimensional motivations of customers (and growers) of local food. The complexity of motivations surrounding local food is seen, for example, in the customers’ perceptions of “quality,” including not only physical properties but also reflecting philosophical and social dimensions. The philosophical dimensions are rooted in values favoring small local farmers and safe production techniques. However, motivations for local food purchases are also deeply socially embedded, as evidenced by the customers’ concept of safe production including whether the customer knows and trusts the grower, the high priority placed on connectedness to the grower based on shared values, and the use of local food to forge family bonds across generations and maintain close personal friendships. All of these motivations suggest intrinsic motivations for local food purchases, which according to Maddock’s (2000) motivational theory represent more

durable motivations. This could mean that because of the customers, local food will be a lasting phenomena, particularly if customers are successful at passing these values on to the next generation. The intrinsic motivations suggested by this study are in sharp contrast to the extrinsic motivation for local food purchases put forward by some in the popular press, where local food is seen mostly as a transitory expression of “Aren’t I hip?” (Rhodus et. al.1994: 13).

In these customers’ lives, local food represents an alternative to the conventional food market. But it is not clear how committed they are to social and environmental change since changing the system is rarely the *primary* concern of these customers of local food. Instead, the physical and social well-being of their own families and their desire to support local growers “one farmer at the time” are more central concerns. Greater economic, social and environmental sustainability are nevertheless possible additional outcomes of local food patronage.

Customer Motivations and Commodification of Local Food

There have been attempts to commodify local food by, for example, marketing products as “farm fresh” and designing supermarket produce departments to evoke farmers’ markets’ “feelings” like Kurt discussed (p.60). Do customers’ motivations in this study allow for such commodification of the concept of local food? Judging from these interviews, a veneer of local food applied to mass-produced products is not going to make most of these customers accept mass-produced-local-food-marketed products as local food. The values of small, local, approachable human interaction, and shared meanings, which we have previously explored, are not compatible with those of mass-production. They are a reaction *against* commodification. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that larger scale retailers could appropriate local food, by utilizing a scheme that taps into customers’ concerns for convenience, price, fair compensation for growers (Hinrichs 2000) *AND*, at the same time, attempts to, or at least appears to, keep most of the values of local food intact. The concept of “auto-production and mass-production of culture” (Peterson 2000) is a

concern because some of the actors (especially customers and growers) in the local food system propose to design and safeguard a food system where power over food and food sources resides with the grower and customer. With global food dealers, that power might again be located elsewhere. This research did not focus on this area of concern in depth, but it would be an important area for further research in order to develop policies for a food system that addresses these different concerns.

Local, Global and the Role of Values

Another potential tension exists between local and global, although it might be only a semantic one for the local food customers. In the U.S. educational system today, global is, most often, a “good” word, standing for awareness, understanding and acceptance of other people and cultures. Schools are teaching children to be global citizens as evidenced by my children’s school mission statement that reads:

The North Polk School District will provide a positive educational environment that will produce life-long learners capable of making, evaluating, and modifying decisions in order to be productive, responsible global citizens.

The concept of “global citizenship” emerges as a construct to combat narrow-mindedness and exclusiveness. However, “global consumers” might display those very traits, due to distancing and can often remain oblivious to the social and environmental costs of their consumption. Many of the customers of local food in this study, however, have developed appreciation for and understanding of other cultures in other parts of the world, through travel and social interaction with people from other cultures, while also valuing small producers’ opportunities to make a living. It is not “global” or “local” as such that motivates, or provokes these customers but rather a belief and/or fear that a globalized corporate world, without the thousands of small autonomous local systems, might swallow up individuality and choice and establish a food supply ruled by an oligarchy of very large businesses.

Many of the customers interviewed come to local food from this perspective. They support local food as a “ritual resistance” (Peterson 2000:230) to the dominant food scheme, seeing their purchases as a protection from “corporate takeover of life itself” (McMichael 2000:21). However, one customer I interviewed, an owner of a marketing firm, believes there is no danger of a global business take-over, as these large structures eventually will crumble under their own weight. That belief, however, does not hinder him from wanting to support “the little guy” out of nostalgia and enthusiasm for the independent and adventurous human spirit of local growers. Local food purchases, for these customers, are not motivated by localism as much as by the desire to protect opportunity for “the little guy.” Most of them see tensions between: a) large-scale vs small-scale production and selling; b) empowering and disenfranchising practices; and c) safe and unsafe growing and handling of food. Local food customers have creatively integrated their global awareness with ideas of local food. Local food, at least to some customers, is about reclaiming power over one’s own life in a very tangible and practical way. It is a celebration of the liberty of growers and customers, in any part of the world, to choose: How to farm - How their food is grown; Who they grow for - Who they buy from; Who gets to keep the profit and; Where the power over food is located. If most of these qualifiers are met, the customer will recognize the product as local food. However, if the key ingredients trust, shared values and solidarity are weak or missing, there will be a weak or broken connection.

In further support of this idea, one of the customers, Annette, expressed her observation that the culture of local food is quite different in Africa, where she had lived for a couple of years while she was in the Peace Corps. She did not find the same values there that she shared in U.S. and European local markets, particularly concerning the handling of food, quality, and variation. Nevertheless, she did support the local markets there because they were small, local growers. She did not develop deeper connections with those growers based on shared values, although she desired to. Her story of one event was quite vivid:

We walked every week to the market... There was no livestock in Sierra Leone at all, except for one man who had two pigs. While I was there he slaughtered one of the pigs because he was sure that Ruth and I would want to buy his pork and he came to the door with this wheel barrel. He had taken his machete and had simply hacked the pig up in pieces. There is one hunk and an ear is sticking out of it, and there is another - this is the most grotesque thing I have ever seen. Ruth just left, leaving me with this man and his wheel barrel. I am trying to explain to him.... But not having gotten any would not have been hospitable. So I got some, which I gave to a neighbor who thought it was wonderful and then cooked it and cooked it....But this was a very bad adventure.

Her experience is another indication that the culture of local food is a construct based on shared beliefs and values. If those are not present, the customer experiences a disconnection with a specific market, while maintaining a relationship to the ideas inherent in culture-of-local-food. Therefore, local food production might be better referred to as values-directed-production. This study was able to determine that these key ingredients of shared values and meanings are central to many of these customers of local food. However, the limitations are that it was not able to establish how prominent these values are. Additional research may be able to analyze how prevalent these values and meanings are, which would have an implication for further local food systems development.

What About Social Justice

In the course of this study, it became apparent that there were values referred to in food systems research, which were not mentioned during these interviews. One that comes to mind is identifying with social justice issues for farm workers in this and other countries (Wells 1996). This matter did not surface as a concern and motivation for purchasing local food. One reason could be these customers' relatively privileged backgrounds. Customers' motivations for local food most often stemmed from personal social experiences, which were further nurtured through interactions with other likeminded individuals: growers, relatives, friends, other customers, teachers, chefs and others. I suggest common stories and shared

meanings are an important aspect of this. An example is the customer who said that one of the motivations behind his buying local food is that he sees the faces of struggling, farming friends in the faces of the farmers he buy food from. It is, therefore, likely that customers of local food who have experienced or otherwise been made aware of the exploitation of migrant agricultural workers and forced agricultural and production labor might support local food as an alternative to these kinds of production practices. But ironically, local food, particularly labor-intensive organic production may have its own form of exploitation, especially in a weak economy or one dependent on immigrant labor (Buck et al. 1997).

The Importance of the Customer

Customers are crucial, if local food is to emerge and flourish. However, as in any culture, members have different levels of commitment and involvement dependent in part on perceived congruent linkages between personal significant meanings and those shared with the grower and the local food market. It also depends on the individual's linkages with other "significant meanings", that might be in competition for funds, time and affection.

Differences in Customer Commitment

The varied levels of commitment found among these customers can broadly be summarized as follows. One of the customers enjoys the farmers' market without too much mental and physical connection to local food in the sense of attributing meaning. The remaining customers convey that meanings, values and beliefs, that are important to them, are nurtured through local food often as a continuation of memories of meaningful pleasurable social experiences and values formed from childhood on. These customers often say that they find it important to transmit these patterns of meaning to their children to see these concepts continue into the future. Some customers value these "patterns of meaning" in such a way that they want to contribute financially, through their food choices, to the livelihood of grower(s), who are seen as the safekeepers of these patterns of meaning. A few of the customers want to use their food dollars and specific actions to change power structures in the

food system, society and/or ecosystem at large in order to safeguard these meanings.

These commitments determine everyday food choices. We can first look at Kurt. He tells of his upscale dining experiences both in the U.S. and abroad, and how those experiences are reminiscent of his childhood urban market experiences, and how they have also enlarged his experiences with and desires for local food. For him, the local food market serves as an extension of previous pleasurable experiences. He values good food, good eating experiences, and the local food market can provide those. This is what local food means to him and what motivates his involvement in the culture of local food. Although he expresses a concern that it is increasingly hard to find what he calls “real farmers who actually live on their own land,” his commitment to buying local does not actively include keeping the farmer on his land.

Bob and Mary, Anna, Lisa, Chad, and Annette express their enjoyment of the experience of local food but they also speak of the values present in local food and they want to pass these values on to their children or grandchildren. Lisa says that people “go out of their way to create special food memories for their children.”

Erik and Jeremy echo this. However, each of them independently say that they buy local because of the “little guy thing” and in so doing add their commitment for the continued existence of small local growers. Erik adds that he sees the faces of his farmer friends in the face of any small farmer.

Katarina, Peter and Ann, and Danielle add that they want their food purchases to help change the food system and improve urban and rural areas. Katarina says that “there is no power in the rural areas anymore” as the rural population is decreasing and their voice is diminishing. She believes that urban customers have an opportunity and an obligation to empower rural growers with their food dollars as a political voice (DuPuis 2000). She believes if they do not, “all will be sorry” meaning

all of us will lose when independent small farmers are gone and we are left with a food oligarchy which commodifies our choices into mass products.

Gretchen's values and motives are a different mix and from a different slant, although the idea of shared significances holds. She values quality and access to variety, but she also values challenges. She finds congruency in the local food market as she perceives shopping at the market as more challenging and the quality better than at a food store. Gretchen is not trying to re-create childhood experiences; she is aiming to establish her own identity through unique food experiences now. She did not express concerns for passing on her values to the next generation. Concern for this is not presently central, as she does not have children of her own. Instead, she wants to bring the previous generation, her own parents, into her local and unique food experiences to share her enjoyment of it. She values dealing with someone who has the same values or worldview as her, primarily concerning agriculture and the environment. She finds this in the local food market. She thinks growers of local food are more responsible. Gretchen has serious concerns about the way traditional farmers farm, and the devastating effects on the environment. She does not want to contribute to that devastation through her eating habits. Gretchen may be in a separate category from most of the customers interviewed, but her commitment to local food, in all respects, corresponds to "Culture of Local Food."

Reclaiming Power

The idea of local food as a political tool to reclaim power over one's own food sources is an important aspect of local food. DuPuis (2000) argues that customers are "evaluating claims and acting on these claims every time they reach for a milk carton" (DuPuis 2000:293). Her argument is informed by traditional consumer research and further developed from sociologically derived theory concerning "identity value or distinction value of products and services....products [as embodying] specific meanings and coherence" (Spaargaren 1997:161). DuPuis is convinced that customers' food choices are political, not just personal, as traditional

consumer theory suggests. She asserts that “reflexive consumption [is] a form of politics” (DuPuis 2000:293).

However, in the local food system, if local food is prohibitively expensive for some customers (DeLind 1993; Allen 1999), this form of politics may be exclusive, favoring customers who are not restricted by their financial resources and therefore can act on their philosophical and political values through the local food system. The result might be that members of society who have no or limited voice in other aspects also cannot raise their political voice in the local food system. This could further influence whether the local food system are moving towards or away from sustainability, since it is not clear that the economic support of only the more educated, higher status and higher income individuals can support the local food system. This is especially evident in rural areas where lower incomes and less education are common and where small local growers find it hard to carve out a living (Solan 1999).

So the question remains, who can regain power over food through the local food system? Maybe if cost was controlled for, more customers would be able to access local food as Stephenson and Lev (2000) suggested. However, it is not price alone that select for different customers, form of marketing is another dimension of selection, as noted by Stephenson and Lev (2000) concerning the white color customers preferences for CSA and the blue collar customers preferences for road side stands. Hinrichs’ and Kremer’s (In Press) presented related findings from a study of an Iowa CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) emphasizing local food. They found that the truly poor, defined by dimensions of power, wealth and prestige, were underrepresented in the CSA despite efforts to include them through subsidized membership fees. They argue that “the truly poor likely have quite different interests and concerns, some of which may be incompatible with the CSA experience as it is now structured” (Hinrichs and Kremer In Press:16). This may raise questions about the “moral” superiority of the “local foodshed” (Kloppenburger et al. 1996) if barriers persist for more marginalized and disenfranchised people. However, the real issue is perhaps “homosociality” as people are socially drawn to

those much like themselves. When there are big differences, how are “shared meanings” to be found? So, if local food is to be an avenue for change towards a more inclusive system, what shared meanings would constitute a moral foodshed for the truly poor? What loss of power is most important to reclaim in their cultural context?

Connectedness and Identity Formation

Previous personal social experiences are significant antecedents to perceptions about the importance of local food purchases. Although the customers of local food in this study did not reveal any personal experiences with farm labor social justice issues, they spoke of previous personal or family experiences with ill health, which emerged as another precursor to local food. Wanting access to safe, health-producing food was especially the case if there had been personal experiences of illness, which might (it was thought) have been prevented by access to better and safer food. Rozin (1999) explains what he calls the “conflict between private and other-world interaction”:

The insulated, safe, self, protected by skin from the rest of the world, experiences a material breach of this boundary a few times every day in the act of eating. The world enters the self. This is an act that is exquisitely pleasurable but also frightening; an act that nourishes, at the same time as it increases the chance of death or illness by toxins and micro-organisms (1999:9).

We observe this concern through the growth of organic food consumption. Organic food sales doubled from 1992 to 1996 to \$3.5 billion and continued to increase, reaching \$4 billion in 1999 (Greene et al. 2001:31).

The local food system allows customers to decrease the fear and “the chance of death or illness” through face-to-face interactions with growers who share beliefs and values. It also allows them to choose what “world enters the self,” the mass producing global food world, or, the more trustworthy, local food world. Rozin (1999) argues that there are psychological risks to eating as well as physiological risks. It is the form, rather than the substance of the food, that matters. In traditional cultures,

the thought that one substance mixed with another alters the first in some way is evidenced in tribal beliefs and rituals. In a study conducted by Rozin and his associates using an Asch Impression design with college students, students were shown to believe that a people group eating turtle was more likely to display turtle-like characteristics than another group eating wild boar (Rozin 1999). One could speculate that local food customers identify with the values and beliefs considered to be part of local food in such a way that they, through their food, become more “local-like” embodying the shared meanings local food has come to represent. Sirgy argues that consumers shop at stores that serve people like themselves. This could be because they feel affirmed or reassured in who they are (congruent, as Sirgy [2000] puts it) or perhaps they want to become more of what they believe they are (reminiscent of Rozin’s research on students’ beliefs).

Returning to Tolstoi’s question “How shall we live?” (Griswold 1994:6) Ruskin’s fourth essay, written in the 19th century, expresses a view, that is quite applicable to the culture of local food:

It is therefore, the manner and issue of consumption, which are the real test of production. Production does not consist in things laboriously made, but in things serviceably consumable; and the question for the nation is not how much labour it employs but how much life is produced. For as consumption is the end and aim of production, so life is the end and aim of consumption (Ruskin quoted in Population Council 1994:648)

In some situations of small local production, both customers and growers convey concern, pride and enjoyment in the amount of life produced (Solan, 1999) as they speak of exchanges of ideas and development of relationships between grower and customer, as well as between family and friends, food enjoyed, bodies nurtured, and values supported. It can be seen in the customer’s appreciation of the grower for doing all the hard work and it can be savored through the story of local food, which, as one customer of this study put it, “even causes the food to taste better”.

Limitations of Study

Although this research has several important implications, as I have just discussed, there are also limitations. This research was restricted in its analysis of local food motivations in different social and economic classes as well as cultural and ethnic people groups, as the sample for this study was rather homogenous in terms of socio-economic class and ethnic backgrounds. Most of the customers acquired their food on a regular basis from the farmers' market in the city of Des Moines; two from a CSA and some also bought it direct from the farmer at the farm. Since customers from different socio-economic groups might favor different marketing places and forms (Stephenson and Lev 2000), this would be an important dimension to keep in mind for future research. Further research on local food customers from socially, ethnically and economically diverse people groups is important for local food systems policy development especially since motivations to purchase local food, according to this study, are clearly culturally embedded and informed by deeply held moral concerns.

A potential concern, which was discussed at length earlier (p. 34), is the reliability of data derived from a method, like life history, that relies heavily on personal recollection, while memory studies strongly have suggested that memories often are inaccurate. However, what are memories but attempts to construct meaning, which is in fact the data this study purposed to collect. The constructs are what are of importance rather than a supposed objective reality apart from the shared meanings we socially construct around objects or happenings.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future food systems' research needs to involve more in-depth study of the many diverse cultural, ethnic and socio-economic groups represented in the local food system to better establish how different constructs of meaning relate to people's perceptions and values connected with local food. It is likely that motivations of other groups are somewhat different from those expounded on in this thesis. Specifically,

as Hinrichs and Kremer (In Press) noted, the truly poor might have other sets of meanings that are not represented by some, or all, of the emphases in the current local food systems movement and markets. More research is therefore needed to determine whether and how the local food market disenfranchises some customers and if so, how they could be included.

Another focus for additional research is the role and meaning of local food in rural areas. The much smaller rural farmers' markets are often struggling to survive as their growers and customers are often mostly elderly, and they are challenged in attracting new, younger growers to sell at their markets (Solan, 2000). The future of rural markets is in jeopardy as well as the prospect for survival of rural populations and their environments. More research is needed to learn about meaning, place and potential of local food in such rural communities.

For future city planning and food systems policy development, a larger study than this would be useful and timely to establish how prevalent a more cultural notion of customers of local food is relative to more economic notions of "consumer." If "culture of local food", as it has emerged in this study, can be widely documented and further strengthened, we could have the exciting beginnings of a formidable food movement towards a more sustainable future (Butler, 2000). Furthermore, since local food produces life: morally, socially, philosophically, and physically for those who have the means to choose it and do so either as growers or eaters, it holds a powerful potential in creating not only a more moral *food* system (Kloppenburger et al. 1996) but a more moral *life* system.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Life History Mapping Pertaining to Food

Present interviewee with blank sheet of paper and pencil of their choice.

Encourage interviewee to think back to their childhood, teenage years, early adulthood, early parenthood (if applicable), later parenthood years and up to today to remember food related experiences. Encourage them, as they recall specific experiences, to write down key words and/or draw pictures.

Possible probes:

How did the food reach your table?

Who was involved in the different steps from acquisition and preparation to eating?

What was meal times like?

What did you eat?

What was special?

What were everyday foods?

Food for special holidays?

Were your family's meals different from your friends and/or your extended family's meals?

Why do you think your family chose to cook what they did?

Historical Matrix

Focus: Reasons and Values that Guide Food Decisions at different life stages.

Purpose: Look at each time period in depth and explore the strategies interviewee employed to meet the specific situation and the underlying values that guided those decisions. (I will probably fill this matrix in as the interviewee talks about this.)

Specific Situation or Life Stage-> ----- Strategy Employed	<u>Stage I</u>	<u>Stage II</u>	<u>Stage III</u>	

Questionnaire

Concerning feelings and thoughts about "Locally Grown Food" (if not covered in the previous areas)

1. What does "locally grown food" mean to you?
2. Has the availability of locally grown food changed during your lifetime? If so, how? How has that affected your thoughts about locally grown food?

Concerning Farmers' Market

1. When did you start going to Farmers' Market?
2. What made you start going to Farmers' Market?
3. How often do you go to Farmers Market?
4. What do you appreciate most about Farmer's Market?

Concerning Self Definition

If you had to describe yourself in terms of being rural, urban or agricultural, which would you mention first? Could you talk more about that?

Demographics

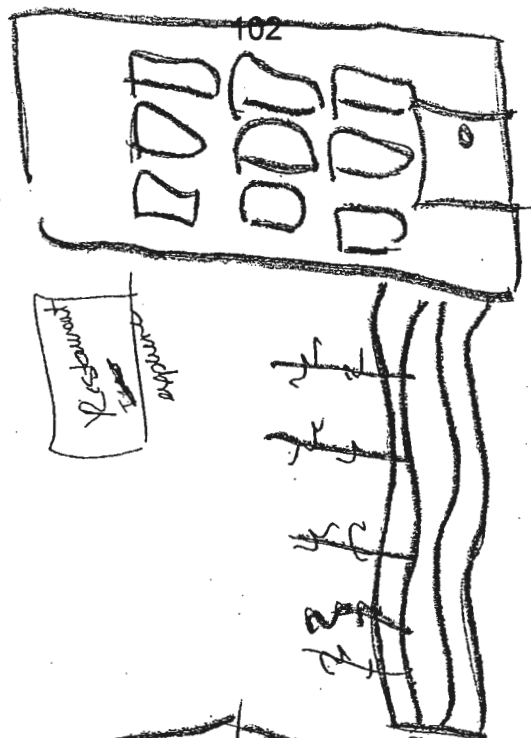
1. Would you mind telling me how old you will be at your next birthday?
2. Are you involved with any groups or organizations in your community? If so what group(s)?
3. Do you have any other thoughts about food that you would like to talk about?

_____END OF RESEARCH INTERACTION_____

APPENDIX B
RESEARCHER'S FOOD HISTORY DRAWING

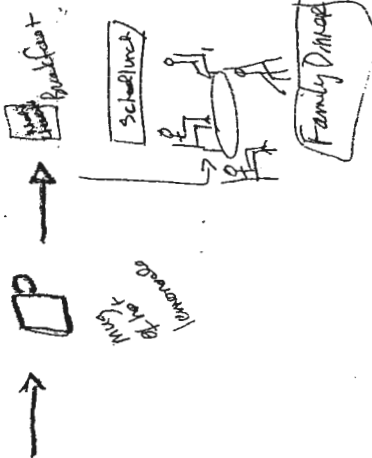
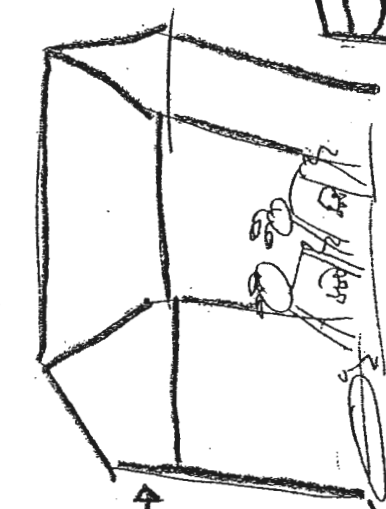
APPENDIX C
INTERVIEWEES' FOOD HISTORY DRAWINGS

U.N. of FA



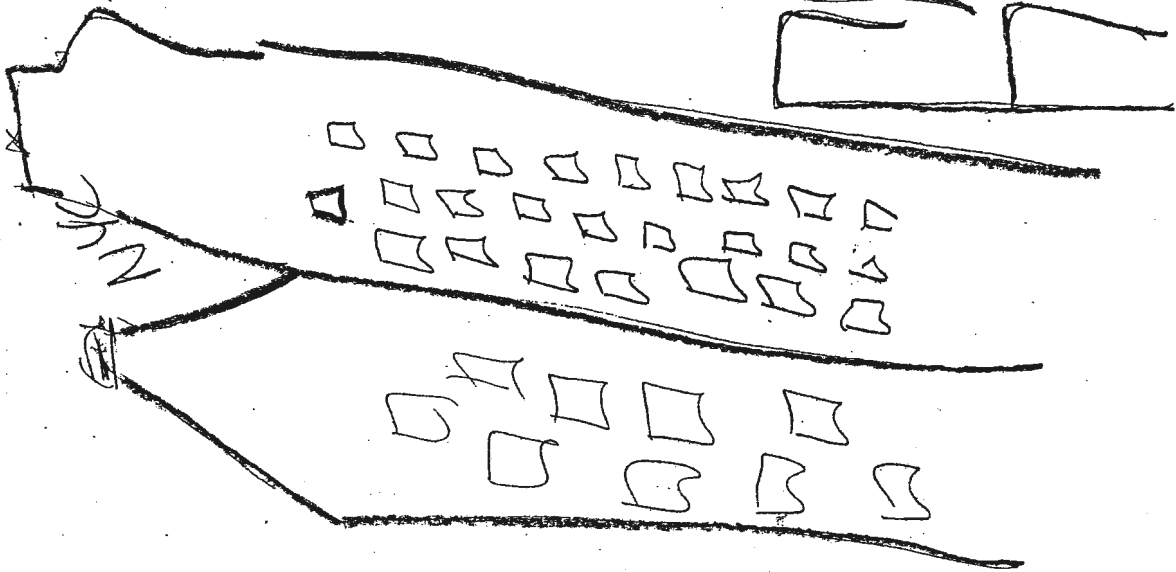
"Lisa"	Middle cohort	Urban with agricultural experiences
--------	---------------	-------------------------------------

DRAWING FROM SPRING 2001
(ACTUAL SIZE 18" X 12")



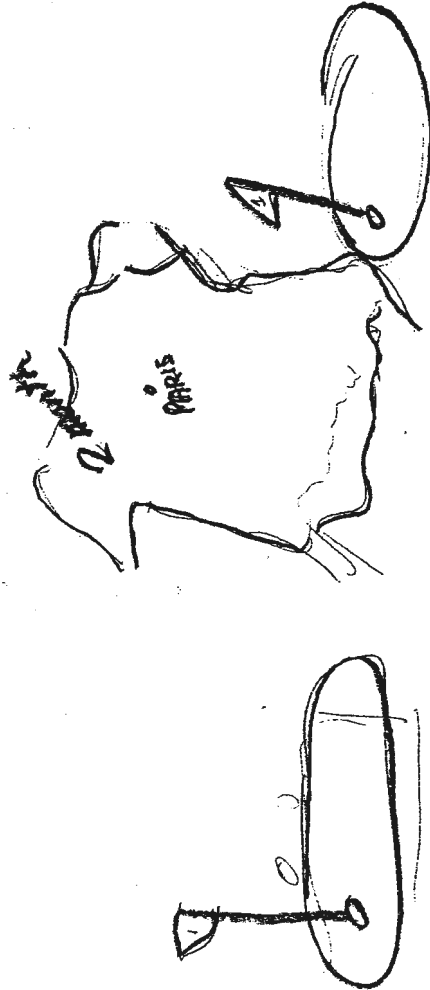
1999

longer



"Lisa"	Middle cohort	Urban with agricultural experiences
--------	---------------	-------------------------------------

DRAWING FROM SPRING 2001
(ACTUAL SIZE 18" x 12")



Des Moines
Iowa

letting

University

Urban with agricultural experiences	Middle cohort
-------------------------------------	---------------

DRAWING FROM SPRING 2001
(ACTUAL SIZE 18" x 12")

Des Moines
Iowa

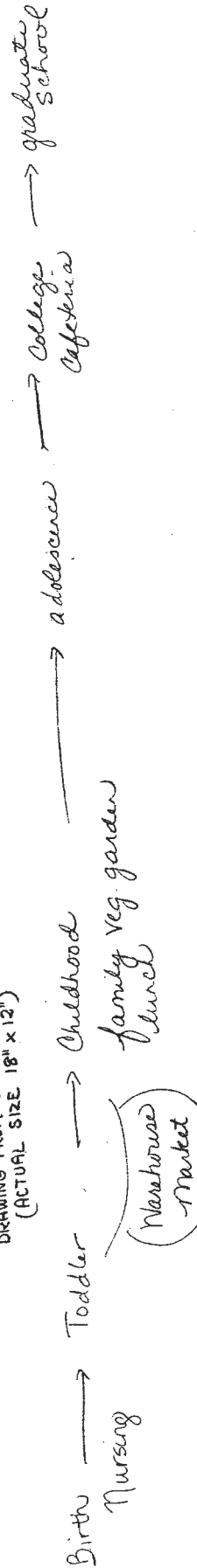
Stable
+
Plate

Amn
Acorn



"Danielle"	Younger cohort	Suburban
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DRAWING FROM SPRING 2001
(ACTUAL SIZE 18" x 12")



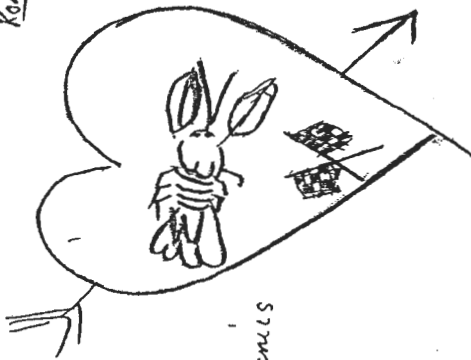
"Erik and Kami"	Middle cohort	Suburban with agricultural roots
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DRAWING FROM SPRING 2001
(ACTUAL SIZE 18" x 12")

Grandparents
Montana
Noak Holidays
Alban

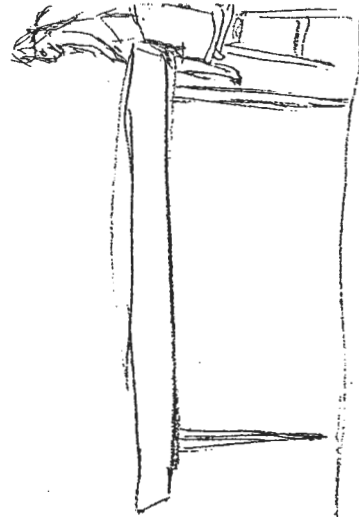
Birk
Alban

Home
Minnesota
200 acre farm
- Beef cattle large pieces
- Sheep
- Sweet corn



Christmas
Pig Crown
Kewt

Sheep - Lamb



St Louis
Grandparents
home made
egg noodles

Pacific
4th July
Pawson

Parents

Moms - baking



Dad's Family Farm



"Katarina"	Younger cohort	Urban with agricultural roots
------------	----------------	-------------------------------

DRAWING FROM SPRING 2001
(ACTUAL SIZE 18" x 12")



Child

Boys were
small - no
candy so was
threat on farm
when playing

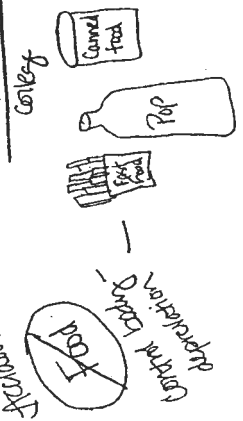
Operating
the family

Values

"Food is love, 'Mom' - had my head
buckle - love it when
Tina - feel a love it when
look the meat - everything value
in heart

Steady progression

Rebel



Control looking -
depreciation

Excitement

Feeling

Cooking for
Trade

New Relationships
fill in love -
divers out-attention

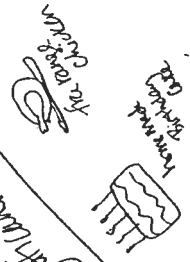
Non

Artist: Passion in
Community
Local
Sustainable

Creative Expression

Art
reaction
quality

Spiritual Relationship



To be
continued...

Christmas Eve



Oranges
Peanuts
Apples

Picked Strawberries

"Chad"	Middle cohort	Rural
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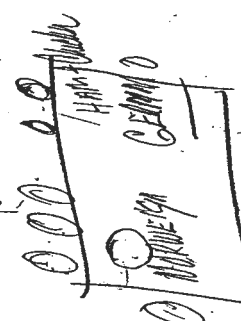
DRAWING FROM SPRING 2001

"Peter and Ann" Older cohort	Urban background
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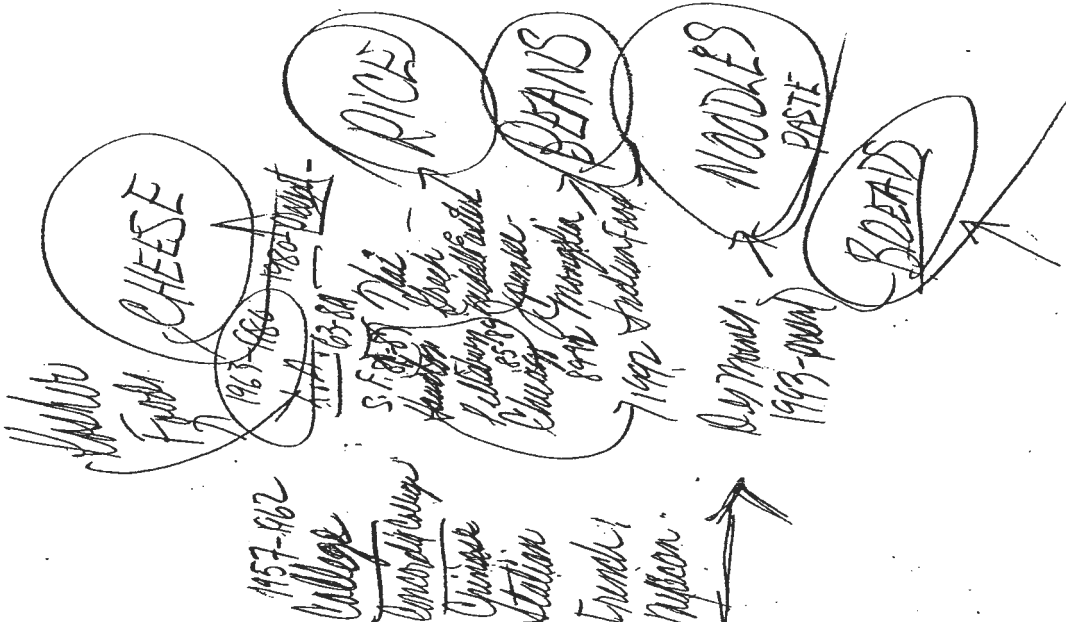
DRAWING FROM SPRING 2001

- Birth 3-14-39
 Western, Tex. approx
 Good food -
 peas, corn, butter, carrots
 beans, radishes
 red, ham, farm
 or 'hatchling'
 beef, pork, chicken
 1. fish: walleye, etc.
 2. ice cream
 3. apple sauce
 4. peaches
 5. raspberries - wild
 6. pepper

1st memory food
 corn
 milk, butter
 Special foods
 1. pig
 2. ice cream
 3. apple sauce
 4. peaches
 5. raspberries - wild
 6. pepper



(ACTUAL SIZE 18" x 12")



"Bob and Mary"	Older cohort	Suburban with rural childhood
----------------	--------------	-------------------------------

Hot Coffee
Mother
preparing food

Age 3
Young Dave path to
Meet Dad for lunch
week

Age 8
liking red tomatoes
goulash made from garden

Age 8
Goulash soup
1st per serving

pure cream
oat meal
fried Chicken

My mother
Baked over
bread
baking everyth

DRAWING FROM SPRING 2001
(ACTUAL SIZE 18" X 12")

"Bob and Mary"	Older cohort	Suburban with rural childhood
----------------	--------------	-------------------------------

young adult
at 18

meat, pt & certain veg for
husband all plant

3 children control macaroni & cheese
pizzas
goulash

Apple, lamb, pig, lettuce, salad
& veg
game all, cheese, garden

My favorites
liver, onions
spiced pig's feet
pig's tails
demon pie
cheese pudding
raw business man.
Roast beef & veg.
Navy bean & ham soup
veg. beef soup

peeled potatoes

My
spiced
baked cake
Choc with whipped frosting

10-11 years
Helping mother
Canning

Back to college & taught 1 yr.
He for his Masters - no for Nursing
Baked & cooked everything, from scratch

West End, Co to Tr.
purchased cookies - some
cost. site
Anything made long & fast
& children

112
Lower - 25
Tomatoes in
garden
bake garden
Dill garden

Macaroni cheese mix
4 children

This past year

let change to fresh fruit, vegetables, turkey
olive oil, core olive & slightly cook veg.
baked, point

Good water

No additives
no preservatives
whole grain
nuts seeds

DRAWING FROM SPRING 2001
(ACTUAL SIZE 18" x 12")

"Anna"	Younger cohort	Urban
--------	----------------	-------

DRAWING FROM SPRING 2001
(ACTUAL SIZE 18" x 12")

1st food
memories



RESEARCHER'S SUGGESTION:

Make your own food life history drawing
and see what you can learn
about your culture of food!

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